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—**Martin E. Marty**



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It takes practice

LIVING LIFE as a Christian is a matter of practices: praying, worshiping, singing, sharing, and giving. When scholars take up the topic they are inclined to use the term *praxis*. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, proposes that virtues are formed by a community's "social praxis."

In this issue, Benjamin Dueholm reflects on the place of practices in the formation of faith and a faithful life (p. 10). "Rituals," he says, "bridge the divide between inward and outward, spirit and flesh, intention and action." Dueholm began to kiss his liturgical stole years ago, just before placing it around his neck for worship. He understands Augustine's concern that rote practices can become compulsions, and he reminds us of Jesus' prophetic words about empty piety. Nevertheless, he believes that the act is "a sign of reverence for a task that must be lovingly and faithfully done whether or not I feel awed by it at a given moment."

I've always sensed a poverty of praxis in my own Reformed ecclesiology. Growing up, I noticed that my Catholic friends wore crucifixes, went to confession, ate cheese sandwiches for lunch on Lenten Fridays, and showed up one day in early spring with a smudge of ashes on their foreheads. Although we made fun of how they crossed themselves at the free-throw line or home plate, I secretly envied them.

In a moment of religious enthusiasm I purchased a Celtic cross and wore it on a chain around my neck. My father did not approve. "You look like a Catholic," he said. "We don't wear our religion on our sleeves like they do." But these days Reformed Protestants are taking practices seriously too: anointing, laying hands on the sick, even imposing ashes on

Ash Wednesday. As for the Celtic cross, I dug it out recently and gave it to a grandson on his confirmation.

I was reminded of the importance of praxis at granddaughter Lilly's first communion. She recently celebrated her first communion at her mother's Roman Catholic church, where the congregation reflects the neighborhood: its members are at least half Hispanic. Fifty second graders came down the aisle two by two, the Hispanic girls in lacy white dresses and veils, the boys in coats and ties, with one lad in an elegant white tuxedo. Anglo girls wore modest white hair bows, although I'm told there was a fair amount of "veil envy" among them. The children sang a song and had speaking parts. The priest, a good friend of mine, invited me to administer the cup to my granddaughter. She looked up at me as I said, "The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation, for you, Lilly." I was deeply grateful to be part of that moment.

My eight-year-old grandson Alex's Presbyterian church also understands the formative importance of practices. His mother helps with communion, which is celebrated by intinction. Alex helps by holding the basket of bread and saying to each worshiper, "The bread of life." His mother offers the cup and says, "The cup of salvation."

One Sunday they were assigned to take the elements to the people sitting in the balcony. As Susan climbed the balcony stairs she realized that Alex was not following her. She turned around and saw him at the bottom of the stairs. "What are you doing, Alex?" she asked. He gave an answer that's packed with theological and sacramental significance. He said, "I'm eating the bread of life. I'm hungry."

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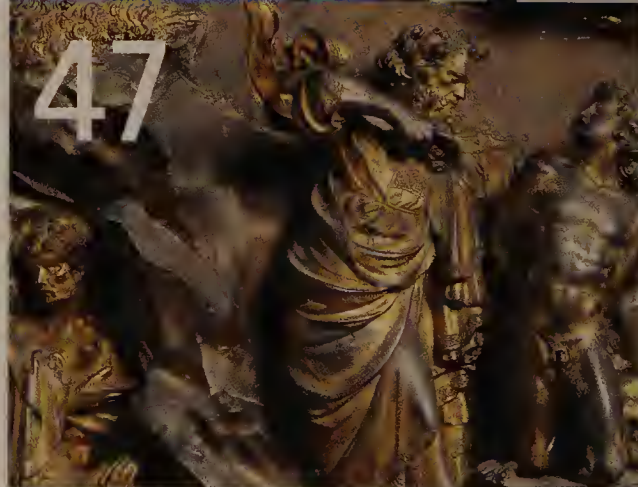
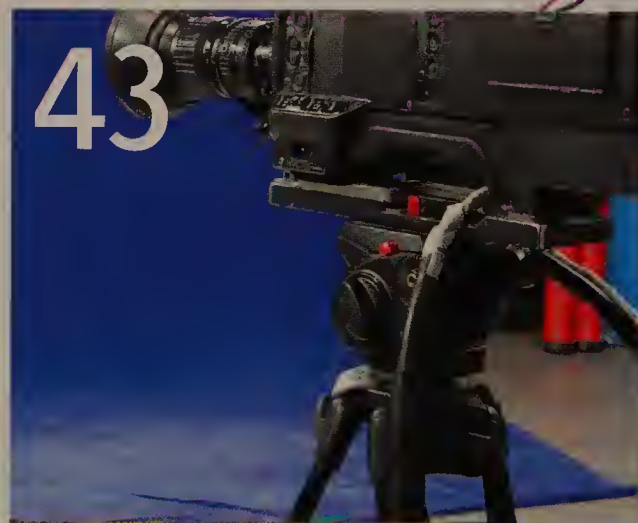
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Israel and Palestine

I agree with the fundamental assumption of John Buchanan's "Weep together" (May 14): both Israelis and Palestinians have been victimized time and again, and churches need to recognize and be sensitive to the truth of both narratives of victimization.

But the parity with which these narratives are presented in the editorial is overly facile. In the context of one group of victims receiving over \$3 billion in aid annually, combined with the continuing gift and legacy of over \$30 billion in U.S. military aid over the decade that began in 2007, the two narratives do not in any way match up and cannot be understood as equitable. While the military aid was called "an investment in peace," thinking people, including John Kerry, might be wondering whether the United States has received peace in return for its investment. The investment continues to create a horrific imbalance of power that does much to make a serious movement toward peace nearly impossible to find or construct.

*Cynthia Holder Rich
Overland Park, Kan.*

Buchanan's call for churches to avoid loaded terms like *apartheid* and to be balanced and fair in debates about the Middle East called to mind a passage in *My Promised Land*, by Ari Shavit. A leading Israeli journalist, Shavit makes an honest and compelling case for Israel's right to exist, acknowledging both the triumph and tragedy in its historical narrative.

Toward the end of the book, Shavit looks to the future with the kind of moral clarity that should permeate all our conversations about Israel and the Palestinians: "Will the Jewish state dismantle the Jewish settlements, or will the Jewish settlements dismantle the Jewish state? There are only four paths from this junction: Israel as a criminal state that carries out ethnic cleansing in the occupied territories; Israel as an

apartheid state; Israel as a binational state; or Israel as a Jewish-democratic state retreating with much anguish to a border dividing the land."

He's clear that Zionism "is up to its neck in the calamitous reality that it has created on the West Bank." Retreat Israel must, for its own sake and for justice for the Palestinians. Like Shavit, we may well have to use loaded terms and strategies to help make this happen.

*James D. Brown
Santa Fe, N.M.*

I admire Buchanan for his denominational leadership, commitment to interfaith dialogue, and keen ability to build consensus on thorny issues.

In the case of "Can we talk about Israel?" (May 28), though, I found the "understandings" reached between Jewish and Christian dialogue partners to be in jarring tension with the facts I've witnessed on the ground.

To say that "not all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic" implies that most of it, or a good bit of it, is. We will never see peace with justice in the Holy Land as long as we perpetuate this myth. We must learn, as I did from the Palestinians I met—mostly Christian and a few Muslim—who forged a deliberate distinction between "the Jews" as a people (whom they saw as pawns in an evil system) and the machine that is Israel. To criticize those we love, when their ways are destructive for themselves and others, shows the deepest form of loyalty.

To say that we "value Israel's democracy, guarantees of civil liberties, and judicial processes" is to imply the relatively consistent practice of these principles. Where are the civil liberties, though, for the four children arrested in Hebron and taken without the adult supervision stipulated by international law? Where is the justice in the use, to this day, of a 1945 British emergency law allowing prisoners to be held without charges for up to five years? Or in

the bulldozing of 1,500 fruit trees owned by a Lutheran farmer outside Bethlehem? What genuine democracy codifies a distinction among peoples on their passports? (Jewish Israeli passport numbers begin with "01," non-Jewish Arab Israelis with "02.") Even worse, what kind of democracy nullifies its citizens' civil liberties when they marry an "outsider"?

*Suzanne Watts Henderson
Charlotte, N.C.*

Buchanan says "the only guaranteed result of that effort [boycotts, divestment, and sanctions] is the anger and alienation of the American Jewish community and damage to interfaith relations." Buchanan's recommendation is for the Protestant community to try to talk to the American Jewish community.

But I notice he doesn't say that is "guaranteed" either. Having worked in the interfaith community for many years and having been told that if we talked about Israel and Palestine, the American Jewish representatives would drop out, I believe it is almost guaranteed that if we take Buchanan's recommendations, a break in the interfaith community will be the result.

The Christian community for the most part did not join in the BDS effort with apartheid South Africa because we were told that would help the communists who were trying to overthrow the apartheid South African government. Yet in hindsight we can see that one of the significant factors in bringing down that government was the BDS efforts of governments and institutions all over the world. What an embarrassment that the church did not help when God's children needed it.

I recommend that we join the BDS movement this time and be on the right side of history.

*Merle Showers
Buffalo, N.Y.*

June 25, 2014

Unoriginal sin

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that the doctrine of original sin is “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.” The evidence of ingrained sinfulness, he thought, is apparent everywhere in acts of violence, in the mistreatment of the vulnerable, and in the greed built into economic systems. Even human beings’ greatest accomplishments are inevitably tainted by sins of pride and self-interest, he argued. The problem is not just that humans commit sinful acts but that they are by nature sinful.

Yet if the doctrine of original sin seems obvious to some, it is a puzzling formulation to many modern ears. (In an inspired riff on the doctrine, stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard imagines a man confessing, “I did an original sin. . . . I poked a badger with a spoon”—to which a priest replies, “I’ve never heard of that one before!”)

The doctrine attempts to answer the question of how sin originates—where it comes from. The answer handed down by the Western Christian tradition is largely shaped by Augustine, as appropriated and revised by magisterial Protestantism. As Charles Hefling notes (“Why we mess things up,” p. 22), the Augustinian account is tied to a literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis and assumes the biological transmission of sin from generation to generation—both highly problematic elements.

Whether or not readers accept all of Hefling’s lively reconstruction of the doctrine, his reflections admirably continue the tradition of rethinking theology in light of new knowledge, contexts, and concerns. Theology is hardly a “progressive science,” yet modern thinkers have contributed new insights on sin. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 19th century called attention to social conditioning as a feature of sin. The social gospel taught us about systemic evil lodged in economic and social realities. Feminist theology has taught us that pride is not necessarily the primary or dominant form of sin.

Sin has a prominent part in Christian teaching, but theologians like Niebuhr have not always recognized that talking about sin is possible only in light of more fundamental claims about the goodness of God and the power of God’s grace. There is the grace that forgives us our sins and accepts us as we are. There is the enabling grace that empowers us to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. And that’s even more original.

The doctrine of original sin is puzzling to many.

CENTURY marks

LET THE CHILDREN COME: One hundred Syrian children orphaned by civil war have been invited by Uruguayan president José “Pepe” Mujica to move into his riverfront summer retreat as early as September. Each child would have to come with one family member, since the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees doesn’t relocate orphans without at least one family member accompanying them. Mujica’s wife, Lucia Topolansky, said this plan is to “motivate all the countries of the world to take responsibility for this catastrophe.” The United States admitted only 31 Syrian refugees in 2013, although in February the Obama administration said it would ease restrictions on immigration (policymic.com, May 22).

FAST LANE: In Voorhees, Pennsylvania, Hope United Methodist Church is offering drive-through prayer one evening a week. Using the drive-through lanes in a former bank building—which houses recovery and support groups during the week—people may either talk directly with a trained volunteer about their prayer concern or drop off a prayer using the bank’s old deposit tubes. The prayer exchange takes only a minute or two, and the identity of those requesting prayer is kept confidential (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 28).

NICE CHURCH: Sweden has the highest rate of domestic abuse in Europe, its suicide rate is among the highest in the world, and it has an alcohol problem. Yet it is people in the arts and theater who

are tackling Sweden’s dark side, not the church, says commentator Giles Fraser. Most Swedes think the church is quite irrelevant. Despite state funding, only about 2 percent of the population goes to church. “Devoted atheists are never going to be persuaded by a theology of the cross,” says Fraser. “But no one whatsoever is going to be persuaded by a theology of nice” (*Guardian*, May 30).

SHEPHERD LEAVES FLOCK: It’s not often a pastor announces to his Protestant congregation that he and his wife are leaving the church to join the Catholics. That’s what happened recently at the World of Life megachurch in Uppsala, Sweden, founded by Ulf Ekman. “Shock, anger, sadness, despair, and confusion” were among the responses to Ekman’s announcement, according to one analyst, though some said they could see this move coming. Word of Life has about 3,000 members, 12 pastors on the staff, and 1,000 students in its school (Patheos, March 10).

FREE MERIAM? Sudanese authorities say they are going to free Meriam Ibrahim, a Sudanese woman who was condemned to death for abandoning Islam for Christianity. (She was brought up in the Orthodox Church, but a judge ruled that she should be regarded as Muslim because that was her father’s faith.) When sentenced to death, she refused to renounce her Christian faith. She gave birth to a baby girl while in custody. Before this latest announcement, the authorities said she would be allowed to nurse her baby for two years before being executed. Ibrahim is married to an American man, though the Sudanese government annulled the

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“The thing is, you have to really want to change.”

marriage, saying it wasn't valid under Islamic law (BBC News, May 31).

GENERATIONAL CHANGE? More than one out of three persons in the American workforce will be millennials by the year 2020, say researchers Morley Winograd and Michael Hais. They will likely shake up corporate America because they are more pragmatic and much less ideological and polarized than baby boomers. The millennials are more concerned about the environment. They value experiences more than material goods. And they have an interest in daily work that reflects larger society concerns. As millennials move into positions of power, they could even change the culture of Wall Street (Brookings Institution, May 28).

CAGED BIRD SANG: Poet and writer Maya Angelou, who died last month, was revered by many persons, black and white, for her way with words and her story of overcoming a difficult childhood. What was less remembered about her was her social activism—her support, for example, of black nationalist leader Malcolm X and, more recently, of marriage equality. She personally called New York state senator Shirley Huntley, who opposed marriage equality, to get her to reconsider when New York was deliberating about legalizing marriage for gays and lesbians. Huntley changed her mind and voted for the legislation (Think Progress, May 28).

CRITICAL THINKING: “Our best college students are very good at being critical. In fact being smart, for many, means being critical,” says Wesleyan University president Michael S. Roth. In the last half century an emphasis in education on inquiry has been reduced to exposing error and undermining belief. Not only does this stance not get college graduates very far later in life, “fetishizing disbelief as a sign of intelligence” has diminished our culture. Liberal learning, argues Roth, should have an equal commitment to finding meaning in culture and becoming absorbed in creative and compelling work (*New York Times*, May 10).

“I’m angry with the leadership of the NRA who always want to characterize this as if it’s a lone madman. That it’s an act of nature we have to tolerate. I am angered by how they have worked to normalize this.”

— Richard Martinez, whose son Christopher Michaels-Martinez was killed in the Santa Barbara shootings last month. Martinez subsequently met with Peter Rodger, father of Elliot Rodger, the killer, who took his own life after killing six people. The fathers pledged to work against gun violence (*Washington Post*, May 27).

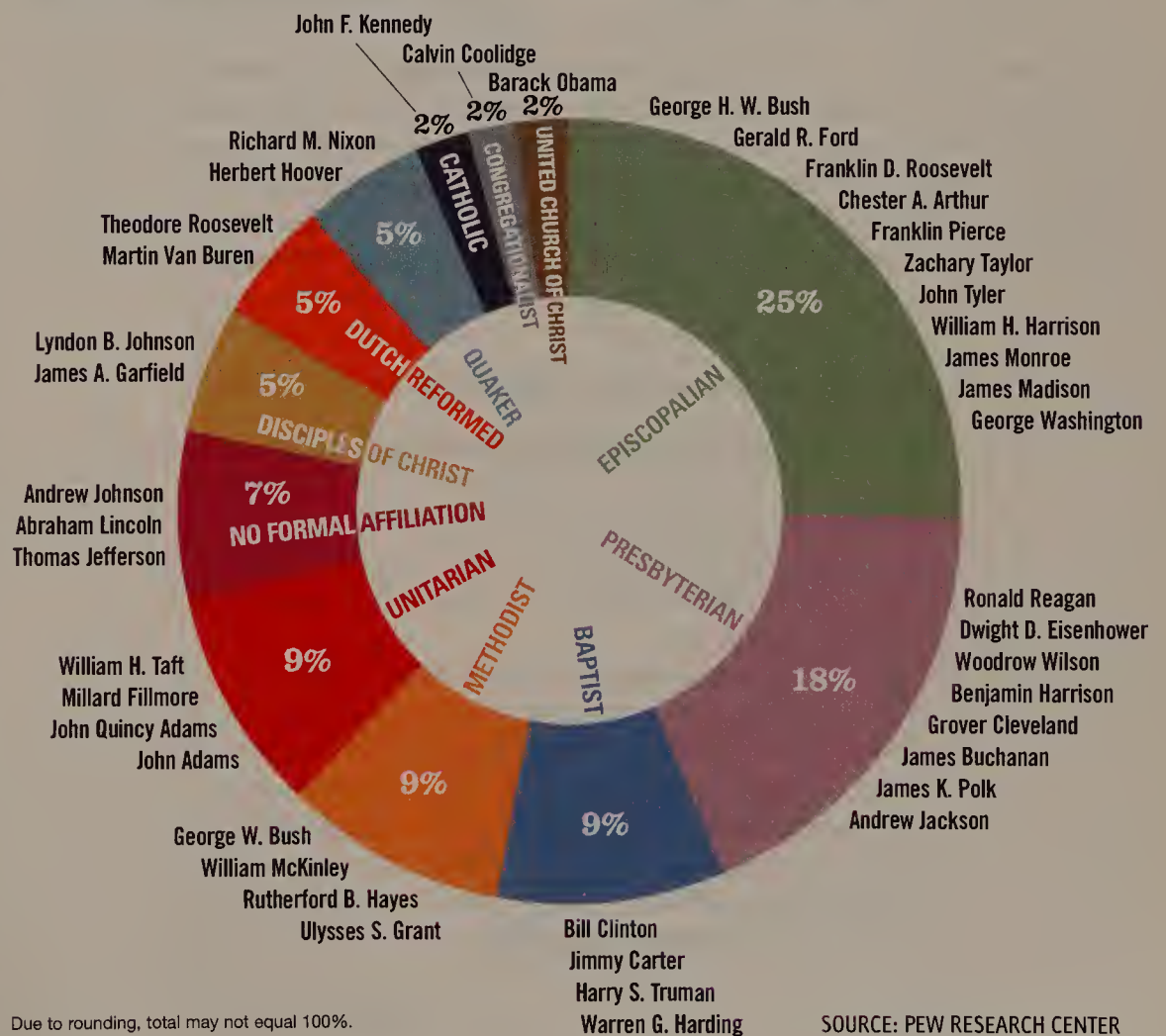
“We have an economy founded foursquare on the Seven Deadly Sins. Just go down the list.”

— Writer and culture critic Wendell Berry, speaking at Central Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky (*The Imaginative Conservative*, May)

MOSTLY GOOD NEWS: Teens are behaving better than at any time since the federal government began collecting data, according to a report from the Centers for Disease Control on the health of the nation. The teen birth rate, at an all-time low, has plummeted in recent decades. One reason may be that

fewer teens are having unprotected sex. High school seniors are consuming less alcohol and smoking less, and hardly any of them use cocaine. While young adults are also exercising more than in previous decades, less than half of youth ages 12–15 are physically fit (Vox.com, May 25, and NPR, May 28).

Religious affiliation of U.S. presidents



Why I kiss my stole

by Benjamin J. Dueholm

AS I VESTED for worship on a recent Sunday, a parishioner noticed me kissing my stole before I put it on. "I like that you do that," she said, to my brief and unexpected embarrassment. I've made this small gesture every time I've vested since my ordination, but no one had ever prompted me to reflect on it before.

Augustine says that habit unresisted becomes compulsion. This maxim rings true with my experience of bad habits, but I'd never thought of it in terms of pious ones. My parishioner's comment made me realize that kissing my stole has long since sunk from a distinct act into a habit—and may now be a compulsion.

"I guess it reminds me," I told her.

I was apprenticed in ministry for a long time, even by Lutheran standards. I watched a lot of clergy vest. When I was young, the chance sight of a dear family friend—a Methodist elder and northern Wisconsin politician—preparing to preside at my cousin's wedding prompted an

early hint at a vocation. Stiff with diabetes, he braced himself against the hallway wall while his wife helped him into his alb. Together they composed a picture of stubborn dedication.

I picked up the practice of kissing the stole from a pastor in Chicago. He had

over time, in reverence for handling the holy things my tradition still closely associates with ordination.

The importance of habit for religion, morality, and social harmony is taken for granted in most of the ancient religious and philosophical thought I've encoun-

The power of repeated actions is stronger than any one critique of them.

graciously accepted a last-minute plea to celebrate Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday after my internship supervisor wound up in the hospital. While we stood talking in the sacristy, he paused to make that silent movement. I was prepared to preach on short notice; generating words was never hard for me. But in that moment I saw the significance of something very different: being formed,

tered. Jesus complicated things. He carried on the prophetic tradition of criticizing received habit and ritual formalism, criticizing, for instance, the custom of washing hands and vessels before eating. Pure intentions and just relationships can be obscured by adherence to such customs. But the power of meaning embedded in endlessly, reliably repeated actions is stronger than any one critique.

Gravity-defying gratitude

There's no such thing as
heartfelt praise too wild.
Yes, wide-eyed, as child
but not bashful, mild.
The thing at hymn sing
to boldly hold in mind,
God sings us, His universe,
in fervent observant verse.
We are His hymns. Amen!
But then, conversely,
might not we be "Her"
shouting forth forte sopranos?

Grace Hough Carter

A non-Christian roommate of mine, bored enough and diligent enough to get through my copy of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, once asked me why a jogger crossed himself as an ambulance screamed by. It's a sort of physical prayer, I told him, bluffing. Then Bonhoeffer would approve of it, he said—it bypasses the fallenness of consciousness because it is habitual and automatic. A previous roommate had told me, with a tone of astonished complaint, that the nuns who taught her in school had ingrained that action in her so deeply that she still did it.

Now I do it. If I forget, my five-year-old reminds me. (It is a curious fact of church life that we still tend to segregate our youngest, most ritually alive mem-

bers from Holy Communion until they are past the age when it is likeliest to fascinate them.)

Ritual actions, the scholars of religion tell us, are generally older and less liable to change than the words that accompany them, the stories that explain them, or the meanings we glean from them. Baptism is older than the trinitarian formula or the doctrine of original sin; Holy Communion was practiced before the institutional narrative became part of the celebration. There are words that are repeated in such a way that they become ritual actions of their own. A table grace repeated by rote, the Lord's Prayer said at morning or night, the creed recited in church—all bridge the divide, often a stark one in classical theology, between inward and outward, spirit and flesh, intention and action.

The skein of habitual acts that frame and weave through my conscious faith (and that of other believers) has roots in magic and superstition and branches in poetry. Such acts can be, as Freud would have it, neurotic compulsions, or they can be deeply invested with tragic significance. And the distance between the depths and the height—the primal shudder and the song of praise—can be traversed, back and forth, in the space of a single prayer.

There is great resilience in equivocal habits such as these. Ritual actions that sustain multiple meanings can linger, even as the movement of will that we call “belief” fades in and out. If there is indeed a renewal of high-liturgical worship among American Christians, I would guess that this is why. A worship experience rich in stable symbolism and repeated gesture can speak to us when the bare demand for assent and enthusiasm expressed by minimal liturgy does not.

I started kissing my stole when I was still awed to be wearing it and to be inhabiting the office it represents. I do it now as a sign of reverence for a task that must be faithfully and lovingly done whether or not I feel awed by it at a given moment.

Benjamin J. Dueholm is associate pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Wauconda, Illinois.

I can't make any great claim for the efficacy of such gestures. If I could, this efficacy would quickly substitute itself for the real meanings of the habit. But these meanings have silently connected hundreds of forgotten liturgies, hundreds of fellow humans journeying to healing or death, thousands of unremarkable family meals and bedtimes into a whole that is much bigger than any given

moment. They are tiny soundings dropped from the little bark of consciousness into the ocean of life below. The more crowded that bark becomes for us—with instant dispatches from India, viral videos from Tanzania, photographs of children we'll never meet, lists and quizzes and news and arguments all begging for space—the more important those soundings become. **CC**

Nearing Lazarus' tomb

He'd seen it all. Swathes of nothingness
spun into stars, the slapping of the first fin onto land,
and now these creatures, by far the cleverest
and the saddest—though listing it that way
felt faulty, as if all happenings unfurled inch by inch
instead of blooming in one cacophony,
the apple crumpling just outside the city walls.

And it wasn't even an apple, or fig,
or pomegranate glinting with infernal seeds,
though he'd accommodate their legends,
accept provisional truths, the same way *they* worked
with the earth un-sphered and stilled
in leaf-thin sketch.

To overlook
imprecision in the premises, concede
to the limits of both flesh and paper,
was what it meant to translate, as to love.
Which struck him as strange pottery:
roll everything that's been into a coil
and score it with each day; cram self into cage
of clay and bone; daub their closed eyes in slip
and wait for it to flake off to new sight. It seemed to take
what they called a lifetime.

But they didn't have that, not right here,
beside the village known as House-of-Misery
whose people rent their clothes. Before he even spoke
Mary's tears were falling warm onto his feet,
carving clear trails through the coat of dust.

If you had been here. He stood
enveloped in the sound of all their moans,
entangled in her locks of dampening hair.
If you had been here. All grief's audacity
pitched in her splintering voice, she raised her head
to look at him, and in her water-darkened eyes
he who'd seen all things felt this:
pain's veil dividing *now* from everything
that is not-now. And he began to weep.

Laura Wang

Bisexual in the church

by Janet Edwards

I CAME OUT to myself as bisexual in my late forties. It was an intensely healing moment. Feelings of attraction to other women had confused and worried me for years, ever since a crush on a camp counselor in my teens. Throughout my loving, sustaining marriage with a man, I had occasionally felt a pull toward women. Now, in an instant of clarity, I was finally able to see myself the way God had known me all along: I am bi, capable of loving both men and women.

From that moment, peace settled in. It was easy to come out as bi to my husband, family, and friends, as well as to the congregation where I was a parish associate. Each echoed my husband's immediate response: "That sounds about right as I know you."

Coming out to church colleagues was

another matter. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), church membership for clergy means membership in a presbytery. The executive presbyter functions as our pastor. I had been in this presbytery for more than 20 years, so the exec-

utive presbyter and I knew each other fairly well. I made an appointment so that I could come out to him.

My colleagues thought I was revealing a sexual practice. I was sharing my identity.

When I shared with him that I had come to understand that I am bisexual, he stopped me abruptly. He said he needed to warn me that there are limits

named in scripture—he was required to follow up with disciplinary measures.

Evidently, my executive presbyter took my coming out as bi to be a confession of serious sin. He wasn't alone. I didn't broadcast to my clergy colleagues that I'd come out, but the news got around. A conservative pastor I knew invited me to coffee. After we checked in about how things were going generally, he began to speak of his conviction that fidelity in marriage is an essential of Christian life. Promiscuity, he said, is an egregious violation of the seventh commandment.

I was confused. It took a moment for me to grasp what both he and the presbyter were trying to say to me. It wasn't, apparently, same-sex attraction that worried them. They assumed that being bisexual meant I was being unfaithful to my husband. I assured them that I wasn't. Now they were the ones who were confused.

It was a disruptive moment for me. It laid bare the chasm between how they saw LGBT people in the church and how I do. They thought I was revealing my sexual practice. In fact, for me coming out was about sharing a newly discovered and important facet of my identity as a child of God. Many in the LGBT commu-

Natural life with no parole

That's what it's called the men tell me after our discussion of Matthew Five and what it means to turn the other cheek, or not, the latter being the path that brought them here. But what, I wonder is a "natural life"? Isn't it, really, the life led by everyone, those behind walls and those without, each of us living the one life given which is to say there's no parole for anyone. Yet listening to the men describe how they found Jesus, or rather He found them despite everything, or maybe because, I think of Paul on the road to Damascus, the sudden light, blinding, transforming, reforming, or then again this, a slow inner revealing, the shy gift of sweet snowdrops on a bleak winter day.

Sarah Rossiter

nity view coming out as a spiritual act. It's an effort to integrate our spirituality and our sexuality, leading to wholeness.

Coming out to myself was one of the most transformative moments of my life. Aspects of my self-understanding that had been dissonant since my youth came into harmony for the first time. I had always assumed I was straight; my self-knowledge was distorted. When it finally sank in that the concept of bisexuality applies to me, it was as if my soul became clear, like a pond when the mud settles and you can see all the way to the bottom.

Sexual attraction is of course a component of my experience as bisexual. But it isn't somehow more central to my sense of self, or to my interaction with others, than it is for straight people. One of the more unfortunate themes in the history of Christian thought is the bifurcation of body and soul—a tendency that has not nurtured a healthy integration of our whole selves. In my experience, being bisexual is about far more than just physical attraction. It's about how—in my spirit—"both/and" comes more naturally into focus than "either/or" does. It's about my whole identity as a child of God.

Our language has not been helpful here. *Homosexuality* entered English in the mid-19th century to describe what all considered to be an abnormality in sexual practice. Some still hold this view, even as the common understanding has moved toward recognizing a range of personal identity that is about much more than sexual practice. Younger generations keep expanding our understanding, so that "LGBT" no longer serves us well. Many prefer "lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex and asexual." Some self-identify as *queer*, a word they use to connote much more than sexual attraction. As for me, I prefer the term *bi* to *bisexual* because my identity as *bi* is not just about sex.

My two presbytery colleagues missed this. They also missed the related point

that being bisexual doesn't mean that I'm promiscuous, that it doesn't by definition make me unfaithful to my husband. Hence their confusion when I assured them that fidelity is central to our wedding vows, and that I had not violated those vows nor had any intention to.

As far as I can see, the only difference between my faithfulness in marriage and anyone else's is that I may be tempted by men and women alike. I exercise the same discipline of commitment that every married person does. But this was a new idea for my colleagues, making these

conversations disruptive moments for these brothers in Christ as well as for me.

I am glad these disruptions led to transforming conversations. Transforming conversations are what the church so desperately needs—in order to see each person more deeply, to get closer to the way God sees each one of us.

This great need in the church for disruptive, transforming conversations is why, when it seems appropriate, I come out to people as simultaneously bisexual and faithfully married to a man. This continues to prompt disruptive moments of mutual transformation. CC

The deft of it

Just spent four days with my mom and dad,
Who together are hundred and eighty-four
Years old, and there are so many wry funny
Things to report, and some saddening things
Also, like fragility, and the ravines that pain
Cuts in faces after years of wincing. But I'll
Tell you just one: my dad at one point tosses
A bag of bread from his seat at the oak table
Onto the thin counter to his right. Maybe six
Feet of air, and he didn't glance at the target.
A little flick of the wrist, and the bread lands
Exactly right. This nailed me, but Pop didn't
Look up from the crossword puzzle. It could
Easily be explained: former excellent tennis
Player, knows the spatial music of the house
In his bones, probably made that throw sixty
Times, but still . . . the silent casual easy grace,
The deft of it! He's all bones now, he weighs
Less than he did when he was a reed of a kid
Away to the war they thought would kill him
For sure, but when I hug him he's still all tall
Though some of the tall is bent. Look, I get it
That someday he won't be sitting at the table.
I get it. Believe me, I have examined the idea.
But that his deft won't be there, his sideways
Smile when I gawp at something he says; I'm
Not quite getting that. He says he'd like to be
Buried in a military cemetery in a deep forest
About an hour away. There's oak and cypress
And pine. This will happen, I guess, and then
He'll be a thin kid again somehow or the most
Deft of the falcon chicks or the willow branch
That finally figures out how to sip from a lake
All easy and casual, like it didn't take practice.

Brian Doyle

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Five reasons why gay marriage is winning

What a difference ten years makes. In May 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex marriage. Six months later, with dire warnings about school-children being forced to read *Heather Has Two Mommies* and threats of legalized polygamy, so-called values voters passed bans on same-sex marriage in 11 states and ushered George W. Bush to another four years in the White House.

Fast-forward to 2014, and the cultural and legal landscape is vastly different. Today, 19 states and the District of Columbia allow same-sex marriage, and federal courts have struck down bans in 11 more states. The U.S. Supreme Court ordered the federal government to recognize same-sex marriages after ditching a central portion of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act last year, and 44 percent of Americans now live in states that allow same-sex marriage.

After four same-sex couples filed suit May 21 challenging Montana's ban on same-sex marriage, neighboring North Dakota is the only state that isn't facing a challenge to its gay marriage ban—at least not yet.

So what changed? The issue is far from settled—and some conservatives insist that it never will be—but pro-gay groups clearly have the momentum. Here's why:

1. Rapid cultural shifts: The culture changed faster than conservatives thought possible. Led by the popular gay characters on *Will and Grace* and *Glee*, gays and lesbians are more visible in public life, and Americans are growing increasingly comfortable with that. A generation ago, coming out as gay was a career killer; now it's almost trendy.

Within religious bodies, the 2003 election of openly gay Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson dramatically shifted the conver-

sation about gays in leadership, and main-line Presbyterians and Lutherans voted to allow gay clergy. The wildly popular Pope Francis changed the tenor of the discussion by asking, "Who am I to judge?" as his church struggles to reclaim its moral credibility on sexual ethics in the wake of the clergy abuse scandal.

Americans know innumerable friends, coworkers, celebrities, siblings, and children who are the new face of the gay movement. And that, says Evan Wolfson of New York-based Freedom to Marry, carries more weight than any court ruling or legislative vote.

"There's no question that popular culture and celebrities and religious figures who speak out create the air cover for the ground game of personal conversations," said Wolfson, whose group has been at the forefront of the legal fights over marriage. "And that is what really closed the deal."

2. An ally in the White House: It's hard to overestimate the power of a bully pulpit, and there's no bigger microphone than the chief executive's. While President Obama may be the country's first black president, he will also be remembered as the most pro-gay occupant of the Oval Office to date—even if it took him a while to get there.

Obama's White House shaped the cultural narrative around gay rights by ending the 17-year Don't Ask/Don't Tell ban on gays and lesbians serving in the military. Like Obama, millions of Americans reached the same conclusion: If gay men and women can die for their country, why shouldn't they be allowed to get married? And if it's OK for the military, why not for everyone else?

Perhaps most significantly, Obama's Justice Department dropped its defense of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, concluding that the federal ban on same-



PRO-GAY MOMENTUM: A Baptist minister from Virginia shares his support for same-sex marriage outside the Supreme Court in late March. Throngs of supporters and opponents gathered outside the high court as it considered cases about same-sex marriage.

sex marriages was unconstitutional. Attorney General Eric Holder encouraged state attorneys general to do the same, and when the attorneys general in Pennsylvania and Oregon followed Holder's advice, federal courts swiftly struck down bans in both states.

"No one defended the law in court," fumed Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco, the Catholic bishops' point man on same-sex marriage. "Is this justice, or just a farce?"

Whatever it was, it worked for the gay rights side.

"If we would have known ten years ago that the rule of law would no longer be in play, maybe we would have had a different strategy," added Family Research Council president Tony Perkins, who accused Obama of "unleashing lawlessness on the country."

3. A problem of overreach: Starting with the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, conservative activists concluded that the only solution to stopping gay marriage was a nationwide ban. But a federal constitutional ban on same-sex marriage has languished in Congress for years, and Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, calls such a strategy "a politically ridiculous thing to talk about right now."

In addition, conservative groups resisted moves to compromise on a half measure like civil unions; Perkins's organization calls civil unions nothing more than "a slow-motion surrender." And that, said veteran gay marriage proponent Jonathan Rauch, was a critical mistake.

"They set an impossible goal for themselves by saying from day one that the goal of success would be not one gay marriage on not one square inch of American soil, and that was never going to happen," said Rauch, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution.

That stance only strengthened the resolve of gay rights groups, even if it meant a strategy of passing gay marriage laws state by state or mounting legal challenges one ban at a time.

"I don't think a lot of gay people are really in a mood to say 'Let's meet the other side halfway' because the other

side has never been interested in meeting us halfway," Rauch said.

4. Religious influence rises—and falls: In 2004, popular support for same-sex marriage was stuck in the low 30th percentile. According to the latest Gallup poll, that number is now at 55 percent. It's now rare to see a poll that finds only minority support for gay marriage.

But another poll number may be more telling about the underlying cultural shift: a decade ago, 71 percent of Americans said religion was "increasing its influence" on American life. Today, nearly the exact opposite is true—77 percent of Americans say religion is "losing its influence" on public life.

In short, Americans have concluded that while marriage may well be a sacred institution, couples tying the knot get their marriage license at the courthouse, not the altar. With the moral influence of organized religion on the wane, more Americans have decided that there's a difference between marriage rights—and all the legal and financial benefits that go with them—and matrimonial rites.

"Some of our citizens are made deeply uncomfortable by the notion of same-sex marriage," federal judge John E. Jones III ruled in striking down Pennsylvania's gay marriage ban. "However, that same-sex marriage causes discomfort in some does not make its prohibition constitutional. Nor can past tradition trump the bedrock constitutional guarantees of due process and equal protection."

5. "Hateful and bigoted": Perhaps the biggest obstacle facing proponents of traditional marriage was a negative image that they were never able to overcome. While chafing at comparisons to racism and Jim Crow laws, the matriarch of the traditional marriage movement, Maggie Gallagher, concedes that her side has been labeled as "hateful and bigoted." It's no accident that opponents of Proposition 8—the 2008 ballot measure that banned same-sex marriage in California—adopted the logo of "No H8T."

Some conservative activists say they brought it on themselves.

"There was the evangelical belligerence, often, in the last generation that spoke, for instance, about the gay agenda, in which there was this picture,

almost as though there is a group of supervillains in a lair, plotting somewhere the downfall of the family," Moore told a gathering of journalists in March.

Conservatives also weathered a host of guilt-by-association charges, which were equally hard to dislodge. In Arizona, a bill that supporters said would protect religious freedom was conveyed as license to turn gays away from public businesses. Evangelical opposition to homosexuality was exported to Africa, which took the form of harsh laws to jail or even sentence to death known homosexuals.

In short, it was no longer popular or politically correct to stand against popular culture and a swiftly changing popular opinion.

"They showed no compassion for gay people, they didn't offer any substitutes like protecting gay families or gay kids," Rauch said. "That lack of compassion came through. It took a little while to register, but the American public does not like lack of compassion." —Kevin Eckstrom, RNS

Gay marriage will be 'law of the land,' says Hatch

Senator Orrin Hatch says legal gay marriage is almost certain to become a reality throughout the United States. "Let's face it, anybody who does not believe that gay marriage is going to be the law of the land just hasn't been observing what's going on," the Utah Republican said May 28 on KSL Radio's *Doug Wright Show*.

"There is a question whether [the courts] should be able to tell the states what they can or cannot do with something as important as marriage, but the trend right now in the courts is to permit gay marriage, and anybody who doesn't admit that just isn't living in the real world."

Hatch's Senate website shows him supporting a constitutional amendment to declare marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman. However, in his radio interview, the seven-term Republican complimented two U.S. jurists based in Utah whose decisions



UNSTOPPABLE TREND: Senator Orrin Hatch says legal gay marriage is almost certain to become a reality throughout the United States.

favoring same-gender couples' rights in his state. Hatch described them as excellent judges attempting to follow the law.

They are Robert Shelby, whose December 20 ruling overturned Utah's ban on same-sex marriage, and Dale Kimball, who declared that Utah must recognize and uphold all legal rights of the 1,000-plus same-sex couples who wed in the state before a January 6 stay. —*Salt Lake Tribune*

More issues enter realm of 'moral acceptability'

Americans are showing more tolerance for a range of behaviors, with sex between unmarried adults, medical research on stem cells from human embryos, and doctor-assisted suicide all showing record highs and increases in "moral acceptability" from last year.

The Gallup poll's annual "moral acceptability" scale has been conducted since 2001 and charts shifting cultural attitudes on a number of hot-button social issues. In the 2014 list released May 30, Gallup researchers said 12 of the 19 categories reflected "levels of moral acceptance that are as high or higher than in the past."

"Americans largely agree about the morality of several issues," Gallup

researchers said. "Most say birth control is acceptable but that extramarital affairs are wrong. However, other issues show clear, substantial divides. These differences are largely explained by party identification, but previous research has shown that age also plays a factor."

Three issues—sex between an unmarried man and woman, medical research on embryonic stem cells, and doctor-assisted suicide—showed a slight increase in acceptability from 2013. The other issues were mostly unchanged.

Gallup grouped the 19 issues into five categories:

Highly acceptable: birth control (90 percent).

Largely acceptable: divorce (69 percent); sex between an unmarried man and woman (66 percent); embryonic stem cell research (65 percent); gambling (62 percent); the death penalty (61 percent); buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur (58 percent); having a baby outside of marriage (58 percent); gay or lesbian relations (58 percent); medical testing on animals (57 percent).

Contentious: doctor-assisted suicide (52 percent); abortion (42 percent).

Largely unacceptable: cloning animals (34 percent); pornography (33 percent); sex between teenagers (30 percent).

Highly unacceptable: suicide (19 percent); polygamy (14 percent); cloning humans (13 percent); married men and women having an affair (7 percent).

Against a backdrop of sweeping legal victories in favor of same-sex marriage, the 58 percent of Americans who rated gay and lesbians relations as morally acceptable was mostly unchanged from last year's rating of 59 percent. Last year's figure, however, represented a 19-point shift since 2001—the largest change for any issue on Gallup's list.

Other issues on which there has been a notable shift: having a baby out of wedlock (acceptability up 13 points from 2002); sex between unmarried adults (up 13 points since 2001); and divorce (up 10 points from 2001).

The 2014 figures were based on 1,028 phone interviews with U.S. adults in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Conservative Methodists see differences in church as 'irreconcilable'

Will the United Methodist Church soon have to drop the "United" part of its name?

A group of 80 pastors is suggesting that the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination is facing an imminent split because of an inability to resolve long-standing theological disputes about sexuality and church doctrine.

But more than lamenting the current divisions, the conservative pastors indicated that there is little reason to think reconciliation—or even peaceful coexistence—could be found. Like a couple heading to divorce court, the pastors cited "irreconcilable differences" that can't be mended.

"We can no longer talk about schism as something that might happen in the future. Schism has already taken place in our connection," said Maxie Dunnam, a retired president of evangelical Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, who joined the statement.

It's a marked shift in tone from ten years ago, when conservatives rejected a proposal for an "amicable separation" as premature. "I don't want us to talk about separation," Dunnam said after the church's 2004 assembly, before the same-sex marriage issue swept the nation. "That's not a game where our energy needs to be focused."

As 19 states and the District of Columbia now allow same-sex civil marriage, the debate has consumed America's mainline denominations, with the outcome ranging from bitter divisions to agree-to-disagree compromises.

With Methodist membership plateauing at home and growing in parts of Africa, overseas delegates have helped hold the line against growing pressure to liberalize church policy on gay clergy and same-sex marriage. Amid a wave of open defiance over rules that prevent pastors from presiding at same-sex marriages and a host of high-profile church trials that have largely upheld church policy, some UMC pastors say the 11.8-

million-member church has reached an impasse.

Frank Schaefer, a former Pennsylvania pastor, was found guilty of violating church law when he officiated at his son's 2007 wedding, though his appeal will be heard on June 20. Schaefer was told he could keep his clergy credentials if he recanted his support of gay marriage, but he refused.

The tipping point for many conservatives came, however, after Bishop Martin D. McLee of New York announced in March he would drop a case against a retired seminary dean who officiated at his gay son's 2012 wedding and called for an end to church trials for clergy who violate the denomination's law on ministering to gays.

The pastors saw McLee's move as failing to uphold agreed-upon church teaching. He should have gone through proper means of changing the church's stance on sexuality, they say, rather than declining to uphold the church's Book of Discipline, or constitution.

"Tensions are reaching a point where it's become a destructive scenario," Larry Baird, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Grand Island, New York, said in an interview. He noted that leaving the denomination is not the group's first option. "We're hoping there's a win-win way out for those in profound disagreement."

Hailing from the UMC's five jurisdictions, the group of 80 pastors and theologians released a statement May 22 outlining the crisis they see emerging within the UMC. They pointed to pastors who violated the Book of Discipline, a lack of subsequent punishment, a crisis over the authority of scripture, and differences in how leaders are teaching the practice of holiness.

Traditionalists believe the scriptures are clear in prohibiting same-sex relations, while progressives see full inclusion as a matter of God's love and justice, they note in the release.

Most recently, the UMC decided to expand benefits of its agencies' employees to include same-sex spouses who live in states that allow same-sex marriage, even though same-sex partners can't get married within the UMC.

"Talk of a 'middle-way' or of 'agreeing

KATHLEEN BARRY / UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE



AGAINST A SPLIT: *Signing a covenant for United Methodist unity are members of the North Georgia region of the denomination despite "some issues about which we profoundly disagree." The covenant originated with a Facebook post by Dalton Rushing, pastor of North Decatur United Methodist Church. "If the church were to split, I wouldn't have a denomination," Rushing told United Methodist News Service. "There is something about the tension between the two traditional camps of the church that feels right to me. I like the evangelical focus of the conservative wing. I like the social-action focus of the progressive wing. And if the church were to split, I realize there would be nowhere for me to go."*

to disagree' is comforting and sounds Christlike," the statement notes. "However, such language only denies the reality we need to admit. Neither side will find 'agreeing to disagree' acceptable."

Other mainline denominations have moved more quickly on the issue than the UMC, which has a global, more conservative membership; about one-third of the church's members are found in Africa, Asia, or Europe.

"Can we not learn from the pain that other mainline denominations have experienced and find a way forward that honors [Methodism founder John] Wesley's rule that we do no harm?" the statement says. "A way where there are no winners and losers, but simply brothers and sisters who part ways amicably, able to wish each other well?"

The UMC declined to provide an official response.

One of the biggest challenges will be whether the UMC can find a way to remain home to people who hold radically different views. Delegates to the Methodists' quadrennial General Conferences have resisted an option embraced by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which essentially allows regional bodies to set their own ordination standards.

For at least two decades, the UMC has strived to find ways to maintain the status quo without alienating either traditionalists or liberals. Despite its insistence on unified rules and standards, the church is nonetheless a diverse theological tent that counts everyone from former president George W. Bush to Hillary Clinton as members.

"The UMC is a pluralistic church with radically different points of views," said William Abraham, a professor of Wesley studies at Southern Methodist University. "It shows how you can live with differences until it begins to bite into the practices of the local church." —Sarah Pulliam Bailey, RNS

Vatican says the church can't ignore social media

Social media can bring out the worst in people, and even Pope Francis's enormously popular Twitter feed is peppered with nasty comments. But the Vatican's chief media strategist says the Catholic Church cannot ignore the opportunities for evangelization that the Internet offers.

"In our church we are always fishing inside the aquarium," Archbishop Claudio Celli, head of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, told a gathering of journalists May 22. "And we forget that most fish are outside the aquarium."

Unless the church engages social media, he said, "we will wind up talking to ourselves."

In his talk at a celebration of the church's World Communications Day, organized by the Diocese of Brooklyn, and in other comments during a trip to New York, Celli acknowledged that social media platforms can serve as pulpits for personal attacks and can foment divisions rather than fostering community.

Speaking to digital media executives in New York on May 21, for example, Celli said that the Vatican has resisted entreaties by Facebook to set up a page for Pope Francis because ugly comments are harder to monitor on Facebook.

He said that Vatican officials spend

enough time as it is “cleaning up” the Facebook page for the Vatican’s news portal; they delete obscenities but let polite criticism stand.

Celli said that nasty remarks on Twitter are less prominent so it’s less of a concern. The pope has 4 million followers on his @pontifex account, and Celli said conservative estimates indicate that through retweets and other forms of sharing some 60 million people see the brief messages—usually sent out once a day in nine languages.

“We are not naïve” about the perils of social media, Celli said in an interview. “But when you enter into this arena you have to look mainly at the positive aspects.” He referred to social media as a “digital continent” that the church must treat as mission territory.

Celli, a personable Italian prelate who was named to his current post by retired pope Benedict XVI in 2007, has pushed the Vatican to embrace new media.

[Some moderate Baptists in the United States recently said “amen” to Celli’s efforts. While acknowledging that the effort is not easy and requires some policing of negative posts, Nathan White, web minister for the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, said to Associated Baptist Press, “I have spoken to pastors who say, ‘I don’t have time to be on Facebook and social media,’ and my answer is, you can’t afford not to do it.”]

[Aaron Weaver, communications manager for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said, “Our main goal is to share stories, connect readers with shared passions, and highlight innovative ministries.”]

The archbishop said there was something of a “crisis” when the Vatican launched a Twitter account for Benedict in 2012 because of concerns over online criticism. Celli said that in fact the number of negative comments on Twitter did spike during the last year of Benedict’s reign as he faced a barrage of bad headlines about scandals in the Vatican.

But Celli said there has been a notable shift in tone under Francis, which he attributes in part to the new pope’s own eagerness to communicate by any means possible. He said that openness to media is a direct reflection of Francis’s view of the church. —David Gibson, RNS

Abuse victims divided on pope’s offer to meet

POPE FRANCIS’S recent announcement that he would meet with victims of sexual abuse by priests is dividing victim advocates, with some dismissing the move as “meaningless” and others endorsing it as a positive step, albeit taken belatedly and under pressure.

“A welcome and overdue change,” commented Anne Barrett Doyle of BishopAccountability.org, who has been pushing the Catholic Church to overhaul its policies and practices regarding abusive clergy.

“Good to hear Pope Francis speak out and meet survivors,” tweeted Marie Collins, an abuse victim whom Francis named to a Vatican commission to promote reforms, on hearing that the pope compared abuse by clergy to a priest celebrating a black mass.

But others said Francis’s first-ever encounter with victims—and his pledge for “zero tolerance” for abusive clerics of any rank—was simply stagecraft aimed at distracting the public from what they say are the pope’s larger failures to address the abuse crisis.

“His upcoming and self-serving meeting with victims is more of what we’ve seen for decades—more gestures, promises, symbolism, and public relations,” Joelle Casteix of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said in a statement shortly after Francis announced the meeting during an in-flight press conference May 26 on his return from a visit to the Holy Land.

Francis initially said that the meeting would take place in early June, but Vatican officials later said it’s not clear when it will take place, though it is expected to happen in the next few months.

In an interview the day after Francis’s announcement, SNAP’s David Clohessy reiterated his view that the meeting will actually hurt efforts to force the church to reform because it will be all window dressing.

“I would challenge anyone to point to a single tangible sign of progress that has emerged from any of these meetings,”

Clohessy said, citing Pope Benedict XVI’s various encounters with victims as well as other meetings between victims and church leaders.

Clohessy said he would not try to stop victims who might be invited by Rome from joining the meeting at the Vatican, but he said they should be prepared to feel betrayed by the church once again.

Bernie McDaid, the founder of Survivors Voice, seemed to echo that view. McDaid was one of four victims of abuse by clergy who met with Benedict in Washington in 2008; he called that meeting “weird” and recently told the Associated Press he thinks the meeting with Francis will be a “dog-and-pony show.”

“I believe it’s always going to be church first, children second,” said McDaid, who has not been invited.

Are these contrasting responses simply differing tactics that can lead to the same end—justice for victims and reforms in the church—or do they represent deeper divisions that could undermine the cause just as it could be chalking up its biggest victories?

“We are not at all uncomfortable with being the voice that says, ‘Slow down, think it through,’” Clohessy said. “No, I don’t think it’s a problem.”

But Thomas Doyle, a priest and canon lawyer who has been one of the most outspoken critics of the church’s record on abuse, said that while he understands the hesitancy of SNAP and many victims, he is “somewhat hopeful” that things are changing under Francis, even though Doyle harbors no illusions about the institutional church.

“It’s worth the risk [to meet church leaders such as the pope] because you never know when something is going to change,” said Doyle, who has counseled many victims.

“I’ve seen enough difference in the present pope to think that possibly he’s thinking for himself and will get beyond the other input he’s getting [from Vatican insiders] and will possibly do something constructive.” —David Gibson, RNS

Islamic extremist groups are on the rise in Africa

In the days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, al-Qaeda became a household name. But today, other extremist Islamist groups, many in Africa, are vying for headlines.

Recently, the group Boko Haram gained international infamy after it abducted more than 250 schoolgirls. Since 2009, Christians in northern Nigeria have borne the brunt of Boko Haram violence, which has included attacks on churches, schools, and government installations.

Christian leaders in Libya fear Boko Haram could spread its influence into their country as a result of a renegade former general's campaign to purge the chaotic country of Islamist militants.

In the Central African Republic, on May 28, a militia group known as the Séléka attacked a Catholic church in the capital, Bangui, where Christians were seeking refuge, killing at least 30 people.

The group emerged in September 2012, and the following year it rampaged through the country, attacking churches and missions, before overthrowing the government in March 2013. The group has since lost ground and is now involved in a cycle of revenge attacks against the pro-Christian anti-balaka rebel group.

Somalia's al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for attacks on churches, public places, and public transportation in East Africa. The group, which got its start in 2006, began escalating the number of attacks in Kenya in 2011 when that country sent its troops to Somalia to fight the Islamists. Last week al-Shabaab said it was shifting its war to Kenya.

Extremist groups are not unique to Africa, said Jesse Mugambi, a professor in the University of Nairobi's department of philosophy and religious studies. Al-Qaeda-related groups are on the rise in Syria and Yemen, among other spots.

"They arise whenever and wherever there are serious discontents which complainants consider unaddressed or ignored," said Mugambi. "Religion is sometimes exploited as a tool to attract



RNS / FREDRICK NZWILI

CAPITALIZING ON CHAOS: Professor Jesse Mugambi of the University of Nairobi says extremist militants are not unique to Africa.

attention even when the main complaint is not religious."

He added: "In the long run, other opportunistic groups take advantage of such chaos—making it difficult to tell who is aggrieved and who is not. Religion is then blamed for the disturbance, in general, although the majority of citizens remain law-abiding." —Fredrick Nzwili, RNS

Briefly noted

■ The National Council of Churches expressed "joy and celebration" at the historic meeting of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis in Jerusalem on May 25–26. Although news media focused on Pope Francis's meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, the NCC said the original purpose was to strengthen the religious leaders' ecumenical bonds. Jim Winkler, president and general secretary of the NCC, said that "unity has been growing for 50 years." Only last year Bartholomew attended the inauguration of Francis as pope, the first time an ecumenical patriarch had participated in a papal ceremony in almost 1,000 years. Antonios Kireopoulos, NCC associate general secretary for Faith and Order and Interfaith Relations, said, "The trip was originally scheduled to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the meeting in 1964 between Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem." That meeting between pope and patriarch

led to ending mutual excommunications and lifting the anathemas toward one another that had been in place since 1054.

■ Southern Baptist membership dropped in 2013 for the seventh straight year. Although the Southern Baptist Convention remains the nation's largest Protestant denomination at 15.7 million—a decrease of less than 1 percent—weekly church attendance fell more than 2 percent last year and baptisms declined 1.5 percent to a total of 310,368. The statistics were reported May 28 by the SBC's publishing arm, LifeWay Christian Resources. Baptisms have long been a key measuring rod for Southern Baptists and the downward trends have worried church leaders. "I am grieved we are clearly losing our evangelistic effectiveness," said LifeWay president and CEO Thom S. Rainer in a news release. The declines are not surprising to David W. Key Sr., director of Baptist studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. They mirror an overall decline in Protestant church membership that has been going on for a couple of decades, Key said.

■ After the army recently permitted "humanist" to be a religious preference, many thought a humanist military chaplain might follow. But the navy in late May rejected the application of Jason Heap for a commission, a navy official familiar with the case confirmed. The details of the decision were not divulged due to privacy concerns. Heap was not immediately available for comment, but groups that have pushed for his commission—and other accommodations for nontheistic members of the military—were disappointed. "The Humanist Society and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers have provided years of outreach and a great chaplain candidate to the military," said Jason Torpy, president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. "We hope non-chaplain military leaders swiftly overturn this discriminatory decision." But the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty welcomed the news. "You can't have an 'atheist chaplain' any more than you can have a 'tiny giant' or a 'poor millionaire,'" said retired reserve chaplain Ron Crews, executive director of the Chaplain Alliance.

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, June 29
Genesis 22:1–14

FOR A FEW YEARS now, I have been collecting ornaments for a Jesse Tree in our home. The Jesse Tree is an Advent version of a Christmas tree: a bare branch hung with an ornament for each day of Advent, each inspired by an Old Testament story. The readings begin with creation and end with the nativity.

You can buy a whole set of Jesse Tree ornaments—circles of paper or felt with a picture of a rainbow for Noah or a sheaf of wheat for Ruth. But ever since I found a perfect blue glass whale (for Jonah), I've been working to create my own set of three-dimensional ornaments. I'm finding, however, that while there are many strange things that have been made into Christmas ornaments, it's hard to find stuff appropriate for Old Testament themes like the Ten Commandments, the Ark of the Covenant, or a burning bush.

For the binding of Isaac, I went looking for a ram. There are lots and lots of sheep out there—fluffy coats, pink ears, many with long eyelashes and little smiles painted on their faces. But there are very few with both horns and a suitably blank expression for the *Akedah*. (I did find ornaments for the St. Louis Rams and the Dodge Ram pickup.)

Finally I found one. I cut an evergreen branch from our yard and wedged the ram into the “thicket.” I hung it on the tree on the eighth day of Advent, and I was happy.

But somehow our cat knocked the ornament down and our dog found it. My husband texted me a photo of the ram, torn limb from limb on our kitchen floor. While it did seem like an appropriate end for an animal meant to be a sacrifice, I couldn't believe that this thing I'd spent weeks searching for could be destroyed so quickly. So far, God has not provided a replacement.

Abraham, on the other hand, deliberately sets out to sacrifice the son he and Sarah spent so very many years wishing for. He gets up early. He finds the necessary wood for fuel. He takes two servants and a donkey and travels for three days. He straps the wood onto his son's back.

And he carefully responds to Isaac's innocent question “Where is the lamb?” with a calm, loaded answer: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.”

Many Christians connect this story with the death of Jesus—Abraham doesn't need to sacrifice Isaac because eventually, God will sacrifice his own son. That seems unfair; this is a Jewish story. But I struggle to find anything else meaningful here. Yes, God supplies the ram and Isaac is saved, but there's

so much agony first. Self-sacrifice is valuable, but Abraham's humility puts his son's life on the altar, not his own. Evil actions have consequences, but God doesn't accuse Abraham or Isaac of doing anything wrong. It's important to protect the innocent and vulnerable, but while Abraham convinces God not to destroy Sodom (temporarily, anyway), he doesn't even argue with God for the life of his own son.

In the end, to my great discomfort, this seems to be a story about obedience. The word *obey* comes from the Latin *audire*, “to listen,” but it makes me think of dictatorships, of the servants on *Downton Abbey*, of Laura Ingalls Wilder telling Almanzo she cannot promise to obey in their marriages vows but must be allowed to follow her own conscience. I associate none of these things with the God I have come to know in my life.

Then this year I became a Benedictine oblate. An oblate enters a relationship with a particular monastery, promising to live according to the sixth-century Rule of Benedict as a layperson in one's context outside the monastery. Obedience is a big part of the rule—obedience to God, to the abbot or abbess, and to the other monks or nuns. As an oblate, I don't have to vow to obey any other person. But studying the rule has made me think about obedience differently.

Obedience is about listening, I have discovered. What voices do we listen to in our lives? Where are our loyalties? What do we value? What or whom do we obey? I grew up in a family where I was encouraged to question everything. If I thought one way, my parents encouraged me to consider the opposing viewpoint. This was invaluable, but it often left me wondering how to determine what is right. I've had trouble deciding what in my life to obey.

Yet Abraham obeys God without questioning. In fact, they seem to have a long-standing relationship in which God asks Abraham for this harsh obedience. We trust those we've known a long time, especially when we've shared danger and risk. Abraham and God have been through a lot together: foreign countries, spousal mishaps, battle, circumcision, family fights, Sodom and Gomorrah, a son saved and then lost to exile. Abraham has learned to trust God, and to know God's ways.

Could he know that God is just testing him? Or has he simply learned to trust God's instructions? I wonder if obedience is related to relationship—if God desires not mindless obedience so much as trust.

Learning to trust in God is a long journey. Maybe that's why it's hard to find a ram ornament: we'd rather remember the joy of trusting in God instead of the sacrifices and difficulties of a relationship with the Holy One. I can pray that I won't face what Abraham did, but I know that the only path to trusting and knowing God is through enduring the hardships of this life with God alongside me.

Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, July 6
Romans 7:15–25a

IN MY EARLY TWENTIES, I worked on an organic vegetable farm. We made lunch every day from the rejects—misshapen carrots, pockmarked zucchini, Swiss chard lacey with holes. Even most of the better vegetables had some blemish, insect damage, or discoloring. I began to understand that produce grown without pesticides, industrial fertilizers, or dyes tends to look kind of ugly. Produce at the grocery store began to look plastic to me—so shiny, clean, and perfect.

We live in a world without much decay. A professor of mine liked to say that until recently, human thought was deeply influenced by the fact that people did not have refrigerators. Food is extremely perishable. In ancient kitchens, meat, bread, and produce lasted only so long before they became disgusting and inedible. Human bodies were much the same. There were no antibiotics, no emergency rooms, and no dentists. People got scars and lesions; they lost fingers, toes, and teeth. They died from what we now consider minor infections and illnesses.

Could the body be considered good when it broke down so easily? Today, we may be shocked by Paul's words, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" or "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh." But we're protected from physical death and decay in a way that Paul and his neighbors were not. Unlike him, we are surrounded by images and examples of perfection.

I'm a recovering perfectionist. In my first few years of ministry, I agonized over details, losing sleep because I thought I'd said the wrong thing and despairing when a worship service, newsletter, or board meeting wasn't perfectly hospitable, clear, or efficient. Then I began to notice that perfection isn't very hospitable. And that I was exhausted all the time.

Perfection is all over the grocery store, but it's an impossible goal for human beings. As Paul says, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." His struggle to "do what is good" is defeated by his human sinfulness. Perfectionism is self-defeating in the same way.

Christians long to do good: to be responsible, to help those in need, to stay cheerful and positive. As clergy, a desire to do good can consume every thought and moment. We want to meet people's needs, to preach sermons that affect their lives, to help churches thrive as communities of action and prayer, to create a place where people can encounter the living God.

But Paul shows us that the true breakthrough in learning to be Christian—and, I would argue, in being a good pastor—comes not when we succeed at perfection but when we realize

that we will always fail. We are equally sinner and saint, as Martin Luther reminds us. Paul calls out the sinner cowering inside us, afraid to be discovered and shamed. We're afraid that to show our imperfections means being thrown into the reject pile, like a carrot with three legs.

"I do not do the good I want," says Paul, "but the evil I do not want is what I do." He's like the leader of a first-century 12-step group, encouraging me to step into the light: "My name is Heidi, and I'm a sinner."

A friend of mine adapted the 12 steps specifically for "clergy recovery": "We admitted we were powerless over our church—that our lives had become unmanageable." "We came to believe that only God, a power greater than ourselves, could restore our congregation and us to sanity."

Another colleague once reminded me to "put Jesus at the center instead of yourself, and your congregation will thrive." It's not that clergy can't ever do good, or that we shouldn't strive to do better. It's that a church, in the end, is about knowing God and helping others know God. And knowing God also means knowing that we're not God.

I am, however, a 21st-century American, and it's hard to say with Paul that "nothing good dwells within me." *Nothing* good? I grew up with Mr. Rogers singing songs like, "You Did It!" and "It's You I Like." At the school science fair, we all won at least

A breakthrough in ministry is realizing that we will always fail.

a green ribbon for participation. I hear people talk about getting in touch with "what I really want," not with how they "do not do what [they] want." *The Message* renders this verse as, "I realize that I don't have what it takes." That's a little easier to handle, although still a challenge to the belief that you can do anything you put your mind to.

It's freeing, however, to declare that I don't have what it takes. It frees me to do what I can, instead of feeling like I have to do everything. It frees me to be myself instead of a perfect, plastic version of myself.

Don't let the grocery store fool you. Vegetables aren't supposed to be perfect, and neither are we. Decay remains inescapable. There is imperfection and sin in this life. And yet we can say with confidence in God's mercy, "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

The author is Heidi Haverkamp, who is vicar of the Episcopal Church of St. Benedict in Bolingbrook, Illinois.

Sin is real but not 'original'

Why we mess things up

by Charles Hefling



PRECOCIOUS THOUGH he is, it's not likely that six-year-old Calvin would have come up on his own with the question he puts to Hobbes the tiger in one of Bill Watterson's wry *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips. Somehow, it seems, he has got hold of one corner of the Christian doctrine known as original sin. It is a contentious doctrine, not least because of the grim verdict that some versions of it pronounce on newborn babies. Hobbes is not the first to take a dissenting view in that regard.

What Hobbes dissents from, however, is only one of the assertions about original sin included in the predominant theological tradition. Besides asserting that there is such a thing, that tradition proposes an explanation of *why* there is, where the blame for it lies, what its consequences are, who is affected and how, what can remedy things and what cannot. Some of these propositions have been more controversial than others, and at times the controversy has deteriorated into hairsplitting, but the issues at stake have everything to do with Christian life and practice.

One thing that makes the traditional conception of original sin difficult to accept is the way it has been bound up with the story of Adam and Eve. An elaborate doctrinal formulation and a seemingly ingenuous episode from Genesis have been presented as a kind of package deal. The conflation was unexceptional, if not inevitable, so long as it was possible to believe that the first few pages of the Bible constitute a straightforward fac-

tual record. That is still possible, although it requires some pretty desperate maneuvering.

Does evolutionary biology demolish the idea that humankind began without nonhuman antecedents? Well, then Adam and Eve must have been a pair of Mesopotamian farmers, garden tenders of a sort, selected by God to be our first parents. As for the "fall" from Paradise, even if the magic tree and the talking snake have to be demoted to folklore status, the drama of origins that actually took place must at some point have erupted in a primal catastrophe—maybe an "original scapegoating," as some followers of René Girard postulate, even if that means expanding the cast of characters to give Cain and Abel major roles.

This kind of rescue operation appears to assume that what there is to say about original sin has been and can be said only because of what Genesis supposedly reveals. The truth of the doctrine stands or falls with the veracity of the biblical narrative, at least in its broad outlines. But that cuts both ways. On the same assumption, it could be argued that once the narrative is acknowledged to be an ancient Near Eastern cosmogonic myth, the whole intellectual contraption called original sin can likewise be set aside as a venerable antiquity.

That would perhaps be a mistake. At least it is worth asking whether the package deal can be untied—whether some or all of what has been meant by original sin can be affirmed, and should be, without trying to derive it from or graft it onto a just-so story.



Best to begin where there can be some agreement: not with sins, as they are commonly thought of, let alone “original” sin, but with an observable fact, fairly obvious and fairly indisputable, that sooner or later leads to theological questions. For this fact, Francis Spufford’s justly praised book *Unapologetic* has a memorable name: “the human propensity to fuck things up.” The operative word is aptly chosen: a mildly shocking expletive, yet at the same time somehow banal. Spufford is not thinking mainly of flagrant, criminal wrongdoing nor, on the other hand, of petty peccadilloes, though none of these is excluded either. By a HPtFtU (his polite abbreviation) he means “not just our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident” but “our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people’s.”

Examples of the HPtFtU are legion. Assuming that there is no need to rehearse them, there are two interrelated questions to ask about the proclivity they exemplify.

Question One: Who is responsible for it?

Question Two: What can be done about it?

Question One cannot be ignored for long by anyone who believes in a God who is “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen,” and whose creations are ipso facto good. Here is not the place to tackle the general problem of theodicy—how far God is responsible for physical disasters like tsunamis. For the moral disaster that is the HPtFtU, in any case, God is not responsible; on that, Christian tradition is as unanimous as it ever is. The inclination to break stuff is ours and ours alone. Accordingly, it would seem that it is up to us, individually and collectively, to reverse this all-too-human trend by amending our ways.

But the traditional answer to Question Two has been that what human effort as such can do by way of permanent, thoroughgoing remedy is—nothing. Only God can do what needs to be done. We may help a little, perhaps; but if we do we are only cooperating with a divine operation. To put it in theological terms, our HPtFtU is one reason why we need grace.

It was Augustine, taking his cue from Paul, who almost single-handedly packaged these two answers together with Genesis, elaborated them, bestowed the result on Western Christianity, and in the process invented the term *original sin*.

Yet even if Genesis is interpreted as literally as Augustine ended up interpreting it, the foundation is not as solid as it might seem. “In the beginning” everything is good, as God intended; that much is clear enough. Something goes wrong only when two of God’s creatures choose to do what they ought to have left undone. Why, being good themselves, do they choose evil? Adam blames the lapse on Eve, Eve on the serpent, and the buck stops there, as far as the story goes. Presumably, then, the serpent was evil. But why so, since presumably it too was created by God?

Milton pushed the blame back a step, building a magnificent epic on biblical hints about a prior, cosmic fall on the part of Lucifer. But *Paradise Lost* is no help. A personified, supernatural tempter may be a more plausible originator than a mendacious reptile, but the personification only displaces the problem. Archangels are God’s creatures as much as snakes and

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humans are. Why did Lucifer fall? To say he rebelled out of pride is no answer. Who made him rebellious?

Assigning blame for the “original” sin to some created being answers Question One only inasmuch as it exonerates the Creator. Why a creature, whoever it was, would do whatever the first sinner did remains unexplained.

The story

We stood on a green hill
on a brisk day,
two small sisters in coats, singing
two-part harmony into a tiny grave.
Our preacher dad had asked us
to sing the one about children
and their heavenly father
at the burial of a baby, stillborn
to a couple named Story.

But this was a story
I couldn't crack. How
could a baby be born
with no breath or life,
how could a baby be dead,
but still, born?

I looked at the mother's eyes
as the two of us sparrowed on
about how life and death
would never sever—I knew
it meant separate—children
from God's strong arms.

It was nice to get paid for singing,
but I didn't want to ever be dead
and flourishing in some faraway
holy courts. Each night I prayed
uneasily that If I died before I woke
the Lord would take my soul—
God suddenly materializing
in the dark room, like a frightful thief
in the night, to spirit some unseen
part of me up and away.

I liked my real home on the prairie.
And I wanted my story: all babies born
unstill into their fathers' arms,
everyone mounting green hills
unwounded by grave dirt,
all of us singing an old, old story
and breathing, breathing,
grace all around us like fresh air.

Carol Gilbertson

Turn now to Question Two. According to Genesis, choosing to eat the forbidden fruit was not a one-off event: it altered for the worse both the constitution and the destiny of the eaters and also of their descendants ever after. Exactly how the altered condition passed from Adam and Eve to us is not stated, but Augustine thought he knew, and his hypothesis was to become the authoritative teaching. In the words of the Westminster Confession, it is to the effect that the transmission occurs “by ordinary generation,” as part and parcel of biological reproduction. That is why, in the Augustinian view of things, babies are sinners from birth. It is also why there is nothing that anyone generated in the ordinary way can do about his or her condition: the effects of the first couple's fall are as congenital as a four-chambered heart.

Those effects, as the traditional doctrine expounds them, had best be spelled out. They are two. In the first place, everyone begotten and conceived in the usual human way is characterized by a defect, a disorientation, a moral impotence—a *vitium*, in technical parlance. This is what manifests itself in and as the HPtFu. In the second place, however, since it is a moral

Is there any chance at all that humans will not sin?

birth defect rather than a physiological trait, this *vitium* entails a *reatus*, a forensic status of liability to punishment; in a word, guilt. And since God is the offended party, the appropriate punishment of the guilty is damnation.

On the one hand, then, because of what happened in Eden we can no more keep to the straight and narrow than we can fly by flapping our arms; on the other, we may expect to suffer the just and everlasting consequences of our failure. Such is the woeful story of the human race that has been read into and/or out of Genesis. It addresses Question Two insofar as it explains why humans stand in need of God's grace, which is the real point of the question; but the way the story addresses it bristles with difficulties.

For one thing, it is commonly said that what is now “fallen,” because of the “original” sin in Eden, is human nature. But if what is meant by human nature is everything that comes to us from our parents in our genes, the Augustinian theory amounts to a claim that a characteristic acquired by two individuals during their lifetime also has been inherited by their biological progeny. The idea that organic, physical traits, once acquired, can then be transmitted genetically has long since been weighed and found wanting. The parallel idea of acquired moral or spiritual traits that are replicated by biological means is all the more dubious.

For another thing, what is inherited is said to be not simply an impaired capacity, such that not to sin is now impossible, but guilt as well, such that we deserve retribution not only for evils we choose to perpetrate but for disobedience on the part of two vastly remote ancestors. There is a difference between their sin and ours, in that theirs was the originating sin and ours

is originated, but the consequence is the same: one and all, we are to blame not only for any wrong we may actually do—that is fair enough—but also for being incapable of doing otherwise. Which comes pretty close to saying that human beings are damned for being human.

This staggering conclusion made even Augustine uncomfortable, but for evidence that it must be right he could—and did—appeal to Christian sacramental practice. Why, he asked, should infants, even before they have done anything wrong, be brought to baptism, which the Nicene Creed declares to be for “the forgiveness of sins,” unless there is something they need to be forgiven for? Babies must already be sinful, appearances notwithstanding, and they must have contracted the infection from someone. Who else, ultimately, but Adam and Eve?

How this can be true—how moral responsibility and guilt can possibly be engendered by bodily mating—is a problem that later theologians tied themselves in knots trying to solve, with highly unconvincing results. *That* it is true, however, has continued to be taught, long after post-Darwinian accounts of human origins undercut the credibility of the tale of which it is (supposedly) a corollary. It even shows up in comic strips.

To return to the initial query: How might the two questions formulated at the outset be answered without resorting to a method of exegesis and a line of reasoning that no longer commend themselves? Spufford’s careful language offers a clue (not that he would necessarily endorse everything that follows in my argument). He speaks of a propensity, a tendency, an inclination. These are all statistical notions, names for the probability that something will happen. Does it always happen that humans sin? Obviously not. Do they often sin? Yes, sadly. Is there any chance, any likelihood, any probability at all that they will not sin? That is where the real issue lies. It calls for a distinction.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that at the moment when I have to choose between two courses of action, right and wrong, the probability of choosing good and avoiding evil is zero. That would be as much as to say that I do not choose at all, that I sin necessarily, that it is flat-out impossible for my action to be other than it is. Calvin—the reformer, not the tiger’s pal—did say just that. He denied human freedom, and without freedom in the relevant sense choosing is not choosing. Any such denial in turn obliterates the meaning of personal responsibility, and the logical consequence, which Calvin also drew, is (double) predestination.

Suppose, on the other hand, that there is *some* possibility of my choosing what I ought to choose, as I find myself doing at least now and then. That is not at all to say that over any appreciable length of time I will consistently decide for and carry out every course of action that I know is best. On the contrary, sooner or later it becomes overwhelmingly likely that I will . . . screw things up. That is what the HPtFtU means. It is also what Paul is talking about, somewhat perfervidly, in Romans 7. In the abstract, I can avoid each moral pitfall that presents itself. Indeed I may want to. But can I avoid them all? The probability is never zero, for reasons stated, but it may be, and concrete-

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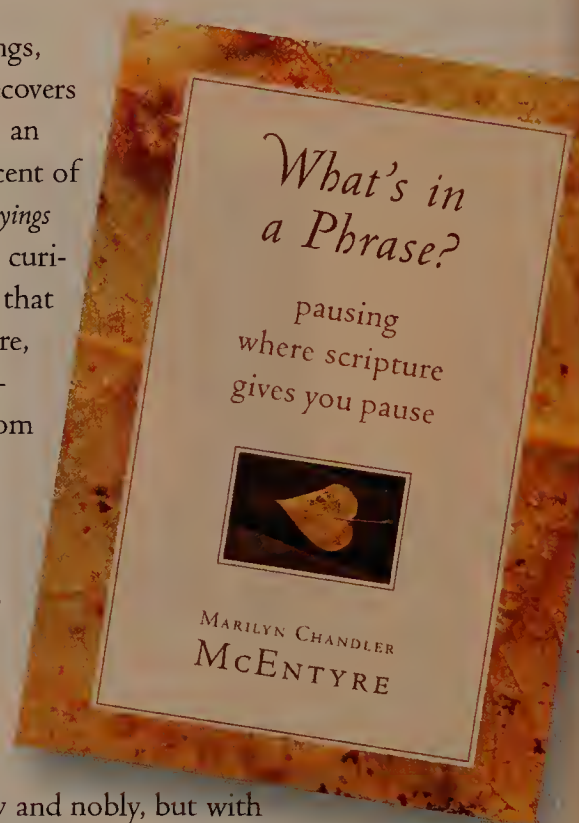
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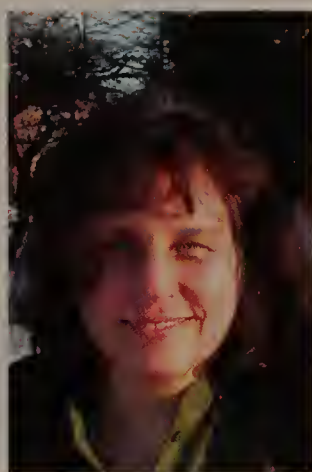


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“‘Energy,’ William Blake said, ‘is eternal delight.’ But Blake was wrong; energy is a youthful, and therefore transient and corruptible, delight. Eternal delight reveals itself not when we possess energy in natural abundance, but when our energy is depleted and then mysteriously renewed by a source outside ourselves.”

(from “Renewable energy” Faith Matters)



ly speaking it commonly is, vanishingly small. That, as Paul says, is a law—a statistical law.

Why is it a law? Because none of our choices is ever made from a neutral position, as though we had never made a similar choice before. Nearly all our decisions between acting and not acting in such-and-such a way are made from habit, which is simply another way of talking about the statistical likelihood that we will so act. To put it in more contemporary idiom, we operate most of the time according to “moral heuristics,”

Asking why sin occurs is the wrong question.

unformulated rules of thumb that have become second nature. Either way, the likelihood is that on any given occasion I will make much the same sort of decision that I have usually made up to now. Can I overrule my tendencies and proclivities? Certainly—provided I stop and think, so as to persuade myself that a different choice is preferable.

But persuasion takes time, and more important, persuadability itself is a habitual disposition. Can I persuade myself, or let myself be persuaded, to be more open to persuasion? That way infinite regress lies. Meanwhile, life goes on, and “not to decide is to decide”—that is, to decide unreflectively, on automatic pilot, as it were. I have to act somehow, and to take the path of least resistance by letting habit have its way is to lower yet a little more the probability of my acting differently in future.

Habits in the most serious sense always limit freedom—and a good thing too, since without them we would never get anything done. Still, for better or worse they do restrict the range of choices that we are ready and willing to make. Now, the HPtFtU can be thought of as an aggregate of (skewed) habits, of (im)moral heuristics, which orient our spontaneous impulses in directions that we may later regret. With that, Question One comes up again. For if what I do I mostly do by second nature, am I to be held responsible for being so constituted?

Perhaps not; not directly and individually anyway. Long before any individual knows enough about *ought* and *ought not* to make (or regret) a genuine decision, parents and friends and the Internet have played their part in forming his or her moral heuristics. Yet it remains that we—the human species collectively—must own responsibility for constructing cultures, societies, com-

munities, and institutions that encourage the acquisition of some habits and discourage others. On the positive side, that is what the church is for, considered as a community that values forgiveness and healing and promotes the habits which its theology calls faith, hope, and love.

It will probably be evident that everything so far leans toward the stated opinion of Hobbes—the tiger, not the philosopher. This position will not sit well with those who cleave to an Augustinian brand of orthodoxy. Humans may be quick studies, they might object, but it is one thing to be in the habit of sinning, and quite another to be a sinner.

Is it, though? The nature-versus-nurture dichotomy, which this objection seems to invoke, is too clumsy to be helpful in understanding any complex human reality. We ought to know that by now. Better to say that to acquire and appropriate a second nature is itself an intrinsic component of the nature humans are born with, and that the acquiring and appropriation begin at birth, and probably well before.

The theologically relevant point to emphasize, however, is that although the results of psychosocial heredity can, within limits, be changed, the limits are very narrow. Christians will want to add that really fundamental change depends on the help of a God who can pluck out a heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) or, less metaphorically, a God who can shift the probabilities in such a way that the

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HPtFtU becomes a tendency to heal stuff instead of wrecking it. That is not all that grace does, but it is where it starts.

That leaves one last thing to say in connection with Question One, the question of origins. Granted that in the world which actually exists everybody needs divine assistance because nobody can help absorbing HPtFtU, what explains the fact that it is there to be absorbed—that there is not, say, a human propensity to get things right? If humankind's collective making of humankind is somehow corrupt, what corrupted it? Must there not have been an original corrupter after all? Since a malevolent God is ruled out ex

None of our choices is made from a neutral position.

hypothesi, it seems we are no better off than we were with the snake in the garden. The existence of evil in the most serious sense of the word has still not been explained. What did cause it, or does cause it, in the first place?

Here, to give him credit, Augustine was on the right track. To the question of why sin occurs at all, in the first place, the answer is that it is the wrong question. It is rather like asking me whether I have stopped biting my fingernails: there is an unstated and in this case an unsound assumption. In a way, that assumption is built into the very name “original sin,” which arguably ought to be dropped. For it suggests that there is an origin, an initial cause, an intelligible relation between sin and some antecedent. Is there?

Faulty choices have consequences, of course, which are commonly unintended but which can be understood as consequences. But at the beginning of the sequence, if we are talking about sin itself and not just bad events that follow, there is a gap, a surd, a glitch, a blank, the absence of what ought to be there but isn't. In other words, sin in the relevant sense is not an event but the failure of an event, namely, the event of choosing rightly. Such a failure is like *nothing*. It is not *something* but the lack of something, the lack of any rhyme or reason, any intelligibility, including the intelligibility we call causation. It can be conceived, but only negatively, since there is nothing for a positive understanding to get hold of.

By no means is this to say that the evil which might best be called *basic* sin is not a fact. It is—a hideous, mind-

numbing fact. But it is a false fact. That phrase makes no sense—and that is the point. There is no sense to be made of the failure that suffuses the HPtFtU. Much, indeed most, of the difficulty inherent in traditional teaching about “original” sin arises from a mistaken attempt to make sense of it. If it made sense, if it were intelligible, it would to the same extent be good. Which it in no way whatsoever is.

Does an utterly negative conception of what gives rise to destructive actions and institutions solve the theological problem of God's responsibility? Not quite. Even if everything that God makes is good, the universe is so made that human wickedness, which assuredly does occur, *can* occur. Short of resorting to the fairy-tale picture of a feeble, ineffective Creator, it must be true that a universe in which the evil of sin would never occur was a viable option, but also true that God has not opted to create it. What are we to say about that?

There is only one thing that can be said, or ever could, and Augustine said it as well as anyone: “Almighty God, himself supremely good, would never allow anything evil to invade his works, unless he were so almighty and so good that he can bring good even out of evil” (*Enchiridion* 11). That being so, the real question is not why God did not make his human creatures infallible as well as free; it is what God has done and is doing to bring good out of the fact that we fail. And that is the point at which specifically Christian theology, the theology of divine grace, begins.

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Jared Boyd (2012 PSP grantee) is Associate Pastor at Central Vineyard Church in Columbus, Ohio. His project “An Agricultural Liturgy” explores how the Vineyard Movement might be positioned to advocate a way of life shaped by sustainable agriculture and justice concerns related to food and eating practices.

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The presence of absence

by Tom Montgomery Fate

ON THE DAY MY father died, he looked as run-down and parched as the tiny Nebraska farm he grew up on during the Depression. Just as the dust storms of his youth had stolen the thin, rich topsoil from their farm, so had the quiet storm of Alzheimer's swept away his best thoughts from the landscape of memory. Nothing could grow or take root anymore in that barren place. And this drought would not end.

A week earlier, my two older brothers called and asked me to come up to St. Paul, where they live and where our dad was in a care center. It was time for hospice. My brothers had managed the day-to-day slog of dad's mental decline for two years—the maze of doctors and caretakers and meds and how to pay for it all. A few months prior, when dad escaped his room and locked himself outside in his underwear in a snowy parking lot on a freezing January night, they moved him to a memory unit.

That was a sad place. All the windows were locked and alarmed, and the entrance door required a digital code. Without the rudder of memory, my father and the nine residents in his unit all seemed adrift in a tiny boat on a wild, infinite sea—yet unconcerned about finding their way back to shore. Whenever I visited them for dinner, I wondered how I appeared to them: a dim light off in the distance toward which they might row for a few seconds? And I wondered what I

would do, if it were me, and if I could still decide. That is, if I couldn't recognize my family or friends, or remember what and who I loved, would I really want to be alive?

We didn't know how long dad would live—a few days, perhaps. On the day he died, we all took turns sitting with him. That afternoon, I sat by his bed, swabbed his dried lips and mouth with a small blue sponge and stroked his face and arms. His eyes closed, his breathing unsteady; he could barely swallow. Yet he still knew the language of water and of my open hands. Sometimes he would startle awake for a minute out of his sleep and look at me with concern. I tried to comfort him but had no idea what those weary eyes could see.

I want to believe that my dad's last word was "love."

So I just sat there in that little room with the gaunt shell of my father's body and his last whispers of thought and tried to pray. But I'm not good at prayer, so my mind began to wander. I thought of the memoir I'd just finished reading: *The Presence of Absence: On Prayers and an Epiphany*, by Doris Grumbach. At age 81, Grumbach writes of an epiphany she had at 27 and describes her lifelong search to relive it, to rediscover the presence of God.

After long presuming that all "religious experience" was like her epiphany, she stumbles upon psychotherapist James Hillman's idea that "absence is the first form of knowing." Finally, she accepts the possibility of a God even without the "proof" she has been seeking.

Her search for proof didn't interest me as much as the paradoxical title. While "the presence of absence" may describe God, it better describes Alzheimer's, a disease that leaves a person physically present but mentally absent. And we had all been watching it take hold of Dad for years. The growing absence: the widening gaps between thoughts; the nonsensical unfinished sentences; the bawdy, rude comments to his nurses. Then, finally, he could no longer dress or feed himself, and his mind began to seem like an empty church: dark and cavernous yet expectant.

Dad was a minister, so he'd spent a lot of time in care centers like this one—doing what I was doing—sitting with his parishioners in their last hours. I wondered what he would have done if he were me. I put one hand on the warm dome of

Christos

Christ lives in my unchosen life, resident
In the upright ashes of these brittle bones,
Mapping blood routes and checking airways,
Catching the breaking news in my nerves,

Ever exploring under wrinkling tissue skin
For portal throughout my temporal universe,
Arriving at last behind these old searching eyes
And, through haunting blur, giving vision to wings

Of candle flames fluttering about the altar's cross
As pipes, chimes and steeple bells ring, resonate
And indwell, bidding me, familiar beggar at table,
To take bread and wine like a taster for the king.

Warren L. Molton

his skull and the other on his dry, stubbled face and cried. Mainly from grief, I think, but also from gratitude for how those last moments could sprawl into an entire life.

Then I placed my hand on dad's chest and felt the rise and fall of a lung, and the other hand on his heart and felt the faint burble of an 88-year-old pump, and the limits of blood and flesh and bone, of body, and the limits of mind, of the electrochemical charges that create thought, emotion, memory, which got me wondering about spirit, and how these three parts of a person converge, or don't—in life, and in death.

Somehow the idea of spirit turned me back to Grumbach and the presence of absence, and what Dad might have told her about her faith. How many times had I heard him say it: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of it. The point of faith is not answers, but meaning. Live in the questions, in the mystery."

The depth of that mystery first hit me when I was in eighth grade. One Saturday morning, in the autumn of 1974, I walked into my dad's office at the Congregational Church in Maquoketa, Iowa, and told him I couldn't be confirmed the next day in worship with the other kids. I was 14 and riding a river of hormones. My face was breaking out and my voice was breaking up, so I can imagine how Dad viewed my discernment process.

"Why not?" he asked. I told him I was unsure, that I might be one of those "egg-nostics," and just couldn't answer yes to all the required questions: Do you believe in God, the maker of heaven and earth? Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior? Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?

Dad was the confirmation teacher, and it was a small town, so everyone would know. None of the other kids were backing out. No one ever had. It would be embarrassing for Dad, which is why he was pissed off: "Damn it. Why did you wait until the last minute?" I said I didn't know for sure. Then he said he thought I was taking the questions too literally. "How am I supposed to take them?" I asked.

We argued like this for a while, but then I reminded him about all the stuff he'd been teaching us. "What about 'the prison of certainty' and 'the hermeneutic of suspicion' and that 'doubting Thomas' guy?" I asked. At first he was defensive, but before long he came around, and pretty soon we were both laughing at the irony of the whole thing.

"Maybe the problem," Dad said finally, "is that you were the only one who was listening." The next day I sat in the front pew and watched while all the others were confirmed. No one seemed too concerned.

Then Dad stirred again in his bed, pulling me back to the present. His eyes opened and seemed less distant. He slightly turned his head toward me, barely squeezed my hand, and in an airy, labored whisper said "luf" or "luh" or "huv." Or was it "love"? He said it twice, with much effort, and I sensed a faint spark of recognition, a presence. But who can know for sure? Then his eyes closed again, and he fell back asleep. A half hour later, my third brother, Ken, arrived from Iowa to relieve me, and I drove off. That night, after I arrived back home in Chicago, Ken called to say that dad had died.

A week later, while preparing a talk for the funeral, I wondered about my father's last word to me. I'm not certain that it

was "love"; I don't have it on tape along with a linguistic analysis. But I want to believe it was. And belief is a different kind of knowing. There is no proof. It's subjective, like most of our remembering. Our perception of our past lives is an ongoing act of interpretation, which involves the whole of our intellect, including the imagination.

I've had to learn this as a writer, but it was never more clear to me than while watching my father's memory trickle away. The things he lost that mattered most were not the facts, not the provable or the certain, not the days of the week or his Social Security number or the number of congregants in the last church he served.


My dad's swirl of stories will keep unfolding.

What mattered was the wild swirl of stories that he carried—that holy reservoir of images and moments, of love and loss—that told him who he was. Shucking corn on hot summer days until his hands bled and swimming in the Little Blue River for relief. Rushing home from the U.S. Navy at 19 to be with his dying father in his last days. Arriving at the University of Chicago Divinity School to begin studies and feeling like he'd landed on a different planet. Preaching a sermon against the war in Vietnam that would prompt such a backlash he would have to leave that church.

Just four stories, four moments among thousands. Yet all flow from one life, with its myriad turns and twists and winding streams of meaning, and will keep unfolding in anyone who knew my father. The stories don't die.

The funeral was a month later on a sunny, hot June morning at the First Congregational Church of Iowa City, Iowa, where my parents had attended for many years. A dozen or so friends from Maquoketa made the 75-mile drive to say goodbye to their old pastor, to remember their shared lives. After the funeral there was coffee and sandwiches and many long conversations. But then our family and friends all got back in their cars and returned to their homes. And it was then that the waves of grief hit hardest. I'm not sure why. That line of Hillman's from Grumbach's book returned to me: "Absence is the first form of knowing."

But I understood this "knowing" and this "absence" more in terms of art than religion. Perhaps Grumbach, an accomplished novelist, did too, or wanted to. I'm not sure. For me, writing at its best is a kind of spiritual discovery amid the absence, amid the vast desert of uncertainty that is art. Writing is an act of faith in creation.

So even though I still can't answer yes to those questions that I ducked long ago in junior high, and "the presence of absence" is often an apt description of my religious belief, I can remember my father with words, with story. Words keep him present. And my last word is always the same as his to me. Love. 

Tom Montgomery Fate is the author of five books of nonfiction, the most recent of which is Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father's Search for the Wild. He teaches creative writing at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

Subversion and hope

by James C. Howell

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT section of my office library, my Walter Brueggemann collection measures just over a cubit and a span. The oldest pair of books are hardbacks I bought for less than five dollars new for a college Bible course: *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* and *Tradition for Crisis: Hosea*. Together they were an epiphany for me. Having thought the Bible to be a flat, advice-filled bore, I was mesmerized by the idea that there was a living history behind and within it. We can overhear a hotly contested conversation going on within the Bible, I learned, and that debate drives our theological and social discussions today. A year later I was surprised to find myself in seminary, scooping up more Brueggemann, my imagination stretched to discern the ways biblical truths really matter, and might still matter.

Through my now three decades of ministry, I have found Brueggemann to be a constant partner in thought, a provocateur who keeps me on my toes. He has made me a more insightful reader—of books, of culture, and of the church. His Genesis commentary sent me scurrying to read John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, and Brueggemann introduced me to Christopher Lasch and Neil Postman as well. I've heard him talk quite a few times. Or I should say, I've experienced him talking: piercing eyes, white beard, grand gestures, and a voice he must have borrowed from John the Baptist.

At some point I wearied of him. I felt his *modus operandi* had become predictable. Pick any topic or person—peace, David, worship, or Ichabod—and Brueggemann would be off and running, exposing what is foolhardy in our culture in the searing light of the Bible's counterculture. I have the hang of his grammar; I've imbibed his perspective; I can perform a pretty fair impersonation of him.

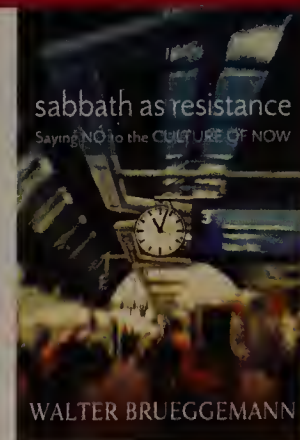
So I've not been reading him so much lately. Then not one, not two, but three books appeared in my mailbox to be reviewed. I decided to start with *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, thinking it might help me brush up for a spiritual disciplines project my congregation was embarking upon, but I suspected I would still favor my fallbacks on the matter, Abraham Heschel's classic *The Sabbath* and Christopher Ringwald's marvelous *A Day Apart*.

Ever true to his methodology, Brueggemann establishes Sabbath not merely as a congenial spiritual discipline but as an alternative to culture—that busy, frenetic, anxious, workaholic consumer culture that afflicts us all even as we giddily indulge. God and the gods, competing for our souls. But then

his unanticipated turn: “If we want to understand this God (or any god) we must look to the socioeconomic system that god legitimates and authorizes.” Knowing Brueggemann, I was foolish to let myself be surprised. Endless shopping and obsessive work depend and feed on much larger forces, of course, so Brueggemann guides the reader into a complex maze: a sense of anxiety located in a market ideology of endless acquiring, hence a consumer-driven requirement for more products, which entails issues of economic leverage; then land is abused, obliging us to engage in an ugly kind of politics to keep the system running; violence is made the norm, which in turn depends on an expansive and aggressive military; money then must flow upward to the top.

Vintage Brueggemann: in a page and a half, you go from thinking about a simple devotional habit to finding yourself sucked into the vortex of power plays in world politics. And along the way he manages to touch on the parenting of busy consumerist children.

What's charming is that he isn't merely on a rant. He weaves every loose thread back into the fabric of scripture. “It was the deities of Egypt for whom work was never done.” “God is not a workaholic,” and “the well-being of creation does not depend upon endless work.” His verbal and visual capture of scripture can be breathtaking: “It is not accidental that the best graphic portrayal of this arrangement is a pyramid, the supreme con-



Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now

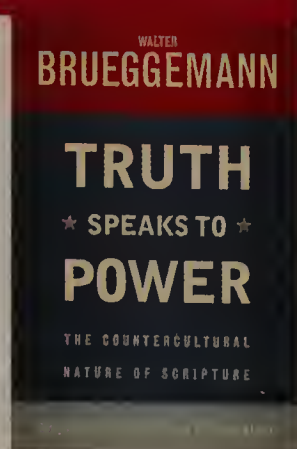
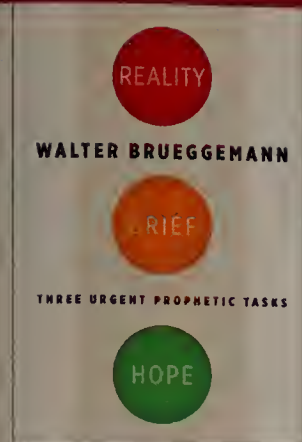
By Walter Brueggemann
Westminster John Knox,
108 pp., \$14.00 paperback

Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks

By Walter Brueggemann
Eerdmans, 179 pp., \$15.00 paperback

Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture

By Walter Brueggemann
Westminster John Knox, 176 pp.,
\$17.00 paperback



struction of Pharaoh's system." And who is the most anxious person of all? The one at the top of the pyramid!

If you think he's making too much of the admonition to keep the Sabbath, Brueggemann points out that this commandment gets the "longest airtime" of the ten, and it does explore property and economics. Claiming that the Sabbath is the "linchpin" of all the commandments, he suggests that it is no different from the first ("No other gods") and the second ("No images": life is not about objects and commodities). Coining a felicitous, memorable phrase, Brueggemann avers that "YHWH is about restfulness not restlessness." Sabbath breaks all the interlocking cycles. Parents don't have to rush their kids into ballet, you don't have to buy the newest gadget, you aren't compelled to get prettier.

The Bible, says Brueggemann, exposes reality and enables us to face it.

Then he ranges all over scripture, finding this Sabbath touchstone in unexpected places. Amos and Hosea upbraid the people for multitasking while in worship, asking themselves: "When will the new moon be over so we can sell grain?" Did Brueggemann catch me checking my phone during the anthem? "Multitasking is the drive to be more than we are, to control more than we do, to extend our power and our effectiveness. Such practice yields a divided self." A clever turn then to Isaiah 56: if Sabbath is the great equalizer, why do we fence out immigrants, women, gays? "Sabbath deconstructs the notion of being 'qualified' for membership." There is only one requirement: keep the Sabbath; everything else falls into place.

He even dashes into the New Testament. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 is the fruit of Sabbath keeping. In the other two books under consideration here he does the same—and sadly it strikes me as rare, even gutsy, which only reveals how timid most scholars are about venturing beyond their narrow professional turf.

Also rare is his way of boiling all of scripture down to something simple, digestible, and useful. With our well-honed deconstructionist instincts, we shake our heads over any attempt to locate a simple, central expression of what all of

scripture might be about. Brueggemann's own methodology is to scoff at totalizing, centralizing statements. But in *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, he makes a salient case that we can understand what scripture is essentially about. In the face of dogged denial and fake narratives that mask over pain and injustice, the Bible simply exposes reality and enables us to face it; instead of offering smiles and cover-ups, the Bible allows, invites, and even pleads for grief; and then instead of retrenchment or naive optimism, it portrays and draws us into a genuine kind of hope.

Too simple? Yes, there are cover-ups in the Bible, trivialized flights from grief, and vain hopes. But Brueggemann's genius is that he explains how this conversation among divergent voices goes on within scripture itself. That's the beauty of it all: there is room for debate, for dissident voices, and yet there is a proclivity toward justice, inclusion, the demise of affliction, and an ultimate goodness stretching from creation to God's promised future.

Reality, Grief, Hope unfolds as a tour through various biblical moments—several prophets' preaching, the Exodus, and of course the Psalms. I felt as though I were sitting next to Brueggemann as he leafed through his Bible, pointing to a phrase or two, with sidebar comments on culture, the inner soul, politics. Although he asserts, "I do not believe the Bible points directly to any political policy or action," he does name names (the NRA, racist immigration posturing, banking greed). And he remembers which readers matter in terms of anything actually changing: "Contestation on behalf of this alternative narrative is the deep work of the parish and the deep claim of the church." Not in "absolute edicts," but in "sacramental gestures": every time we open scripture, break bread or touch the poor, subversion is doing its work—and we in the church need it to be named in just this way.

Once we get the hang of Brueggemann's modus operandi, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture* will come as no surprise. Here he frames his theme around four "case studies," texts portraying Moses, Solomon, Elisha, and Josiah. This time, instead of feeling like you're sitting next to Brueggemann scanning these passages, you realize that others have pulled up to the table: Paul Ricoeur, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud—all masters of suspicion—along with Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Oscar Romero. The chatter is lively and rich. But I find myself wanting to raise my hand now and then and ask questions like, "Historically speaking, how did these subversive truths we detect in scripture survive instead of being squashed?" I always want more historical critical backstory and rationale from Brueggemann.

Brueggemann's ramble through Solomonite texts is stunning and serves as a perfect example of his entire project. Much fawning is done over this eminently successful monarch, but then he is clearly reprimanded by the Deuteronomist. Some of

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the Psalms buttress Solomon's imperial overreach, and yet it is the clearly conditional covenant that saves the broader narrative—and us. Finally, with reckless abandon, Brueggemann asserts that Jesus' musing in the Sermon on the Mount about birds and flowers that are clothed more elegantly than Solomon is actually his snub of Solomon as "the icon of commodity anxiety." And then Brueggemann even has the temerity to suggest that the fool in Jesus' parable of the barns is none other than Solomon. I will always hear those two passages differently now.

Noting the way Elisha interrupts the flow of the royal annals, proving himself to be the real actor in history (like a Mandela or a Romero), Brueggemann flashes his verbal panache: "Thus we have a narratively constructed world that features inexplicable transformations wrought by an uncredentialed character who bears the truth concerning God's power in the world to the exclusion of the king."

As much as I admire Brueggemann, I do have my quibbles. His approach is so . . . *literary*. Reading his assessments of the text, words on a page, I lose the sense that real people with beards, tunics, bare feet, appetites, and hair are involved. Characters are incorporeal ideas; kings and prophets seem more ciphers on a page than breathing, perspiring, frightening, or courageous human beings. I find myself wanting more archaeology, more history, more artifacts, more personal imagination. Those regimes the prophets blasted owned lots of shiny things we find in museums and built massive stone palaces whose

remains are far from mute testimony to the megalomania of real kings, and also to their eventual and inevitable demise.

Sometimes his application to modernity, bravely attempted, feels hollow. In *Reality, Grief, Hope*, he compares 587 BC to America's 9/11—a far paler, less comprehensive catastrophe. The nation was hardly emasculated in 2001. He compares Israel's sense of being chosen with America's gauche belief in its own exceptionalism. I find myself thinking that Israel actually was chosen by God, its tendencies toward arrogance and complacency notwithstanding; any notion in America that we are chosen or even all that special is nothing but arrogance in the first place. Ours is not chosenness but economic and cultural privilege and entitlement, which breeds militarism, racism, and a vapid sense of superiority.

The question that nags me the most when I read these three books is Brueggemann's underlying and often verbalized assumption that there is a totalizing empire that silences truth and goodness and keeps us addicted. Power and wealth are concentrated among a few at the top of the pyramid, and that concentration is reinforced by government and legitimated by religion. Brueggemann sees collusion everywhere: politics, the corporate world, malls, the military machine, even in institutions like academia and in fields like technology.

But I wonder: Is there really a single colluded imperial reality that plagues us? Is there really any longer such an ominous, monolithic entity? Or are we now so fragmented that

nothing hangs together? The old collusions, I suspect, have splintered apart; so if anything there are even more victims, and an increasingly impossible battle with not a single foe but myriad unlocatable foes. There is no longer a single empire to wage prophetic battle against. This harrowing possibility worries me more than Brueggemann's implacable singular foe.

Conversely, are the "good guys" Brueggemann favors in the intertextual conversations he detects as holy as he portrays them? In the Exodus it is not so much that "power eventually succumbs to truth," or that truth trumps power, but that Pharaoh's power crumples before an even nastier power. The prophets must have struggled not merely against the collusions of empire, but also with their own proneness to wander, their own jaded ungodliness.

And yet Brueggemann is always hopeful, and I feel hopeful when I've finished reading him. On the dust jacket of one of his first books, Brueggemann's teacher James Muilenburg claimed that he was "among the most promising of the rising generation of Old Testament scholars." That promise has been kept, and much more delivered.

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Faith MATTERS

by Samuel Wells

The banality of clergy failure

I'VE TRAVELED a long way. I'm the preacher from across the pond who has dropped everything in the face of tragedy, reached out, and said, "Sure, I'll come to the funeral. How could I not? I'll use air miles. And yes, I'll preach. Be glad to."

At the funeral I'm surrounded by old friends, parishioners, and acquaintances. And then comes a word of recognition: "Sam!" And she's before me, thrilled to see me, full of memories, energy, sadness—about the tragic circumstances—but also bursting with appreciation for my ministry, my moving sermon, and how marvelous I was when I used to be here—all the things pastors pretend people shouldn't say but in fact crave.

And this: I haven't a clue who she is. My mind goes blank. I'm in a different world now, showing hundreds of other people how important they are to God, and—if that's too remote—important at least to me. And maybe my head or more likely my heart can't take any more people, because when I run down my mental checklist of those whose names I may not instantly recall but whose lives I nonetheless deeply cherish, she isn't on it. She's greeting me as if I changed her life, and I'm failing to keep up the pretense that her name will come to me any moment.

Her face falls. Plummet. She's crushed. Here was a pastor, it had seemed, who was different than the others—whom she trusted, to whom she'd poured out her soul (surely if she'd done that I'd at least recognize her), whom she'd put in the trophy cabinet of people who would never let her down. And I just had. Not by some public or private fall from grace, but by something more personal, more painful, more pitiful—by forgetting her.

Half a minute later I glimpse her husband, and glints of recognition dawn. I think I recall that beard . . . But the damage is done. The lie is exposed. I'm all surface and no depth, the pastor who can put on a show but deep down doesn't care enough to remember, who made her feel special but when she was no longer useful moved on elsewhere, who could talk but didn't walk. Maybe God, in the end, was like that too.

This is the banality of clergy failure—that we put ourselves between people and God. That we tacitly assume God is distant, remote, occupied, distracted, and so we, to compensate, must be present, intense, hearty, and inspiring. We must be more human than God. God can't possibly remember this woman's name, her complex story of not having and then having children and their complex story. So we invest deeply in

her, utterly professionally, of course, and her melting heart, her trust, her signs of faith and hope—these are the medals of our ministry. Our people need us, need us badly, because only through our sacrificial and immensely thoughtful yet appropriate love can they possibly glimpse a God who seems reluctant to be made known in any explicit and tangible way.

There's a good element to this. Part of the atonement is the discovery that in wounding and lacerating Christ's body on the cross, we matter to God. If we matter negatively, by hurting and killing, then we can matter at least as positively by giving joy and delight. And just as the risen Christ still has the wounds of the tree, so the ascended Lord takes with him the joy we evoke in his heart. The pastor who says, with care, y'all matter to me is showing that we all matter to God.

Of course we're not up to it. We forget her husband was going in for a scan and we should have inquired how it went. We neglect to ask her to read at the carol service. We get talking to someone else after the worship service, and she drifts away disconsolate to her car. But all these things are forgiven. And we know that they're healthy ways of indicating she

The pastor's job is not to be more interesting than God.

shouldn't overinvest in us, because it's not really about us, it's about Christ and Christ's body, the church. In fact, we shouldn't be standing between her and God in the first place. God can look after that part without our unique contribution. The pastor's job is not so much in front of the people as behind them, ushering them like sheep into a place where they may encounter God together. It's not about being more interesting than God. Cyprian never said, "Outside the pastor there is no salvation."

When I haven't the faintest idea who she is, and both parties are forced to face up to the illusions of pastoral care, we may both lick our wounds for a while. But maybe later she'll say, "The pastor forgot me today. But God remembers me every day. And always will." And it could be that later I'll say, "I've a feeling she just discovered I'm not God—and started believing in the real God. Perhaps I did too."

Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.

IN Review

Christians killing Christians

by Jonathan H. Ebel

In this centennial of the beginning of the Great War, citizens, scholars, artists, and politicians will set aside time, measure out words, and use painting, sculpture, and film to recall the four years of ferocious violence that shaped the modern world. This is both good and important.

It is good because the Great War has too long been overshadowed—especially in the United States—by the still greater war that came along two decades later. It is important because the lessons of the Great War are both more enduring and more applicable to our current religio-political moment than those that emerged from the mid-century struggle against expansionist totalitarianisms.

For many, the lessons of the Great War revolve around accidents of history and their ability to warp the noblest of intentions. For others these lessons pertain to the interconnectedness of “progress” and barbarity. Still others see the Great War as a case study in the waste that governments and industry are willing to generate in pursuit of power and wealth.

In recent years more scholars have begun to examine the Great War for lessons about religion and war. The result has been a small but fascinating collection of works on the religious cultures of combatant nations as they were expressed by politicians, civilian clergy, chaplains, and military personnel. For the most part, these works have focused on single nations, weaving together the religious, the social,

and the military in meaningful but bounded studies—monographs in the truest sense.

Philip Jenkins builds upon this specialized historiography as it treats the Great War as a global religious conflict. His vividly written synthesis belongs at the top of reading lists on the conflict.

Not only does Jenkins provide detailed accounts of interactions between religion and militarism, religion and combat, and religion and trauma on all sides of the war, he also demonstrates that the world torn apart by the Great War was a world of many shared religious concerns and vocabularies, a world that needed the extreme fission that religion accomplishes in order to launch and sustain such a brutal conflict.

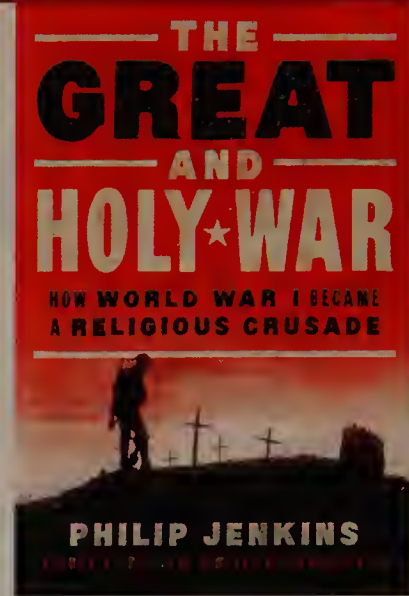
With the balance and perspective of an experienced historian, Jenkins presents and interprets the religious cultures of the warring nations alongside each other, building as convincing an argument as I have yet seen for the deep importance of religion at all levels and in all phases of the war.

“Christian leaders,” he writes, “gave an absolute religious underpinning to warfare conducted by states that were seen as executing the will of God.” But this sacralization was something more than the eager pronouncements of self-important or sycophantic divines. It emerged from and to a large extent harmonized with “religious language and assumptions [that] were omnipresent, . . . part of the air people breathed.”

Popular tales of angels and ghosts

fighting alongside soldiers, reflections on the workings of fate and chance, and stories equating the suffering, dying soldier with Christ emerged on both sides of the Western Front and on most European and American home fronts, demonstrating a widespread predisposition to view and experience the war as more than an earthly endeavor. The words of one German soldier fighting at Verdun could well have been written by a soldier or civilian on the other side of the war: “Here we have war, war in its most appalling form, and in our distress we realize the nearness of God.”

Jenkins also moves the narrative beyond the trenches of the Western Front to the far reaches of the warring empires to demonstrate that the religious effects of the conflict—and attempts to discern religious meaning in it—extended well beyond Europe and what was once called Christendom. This broad approach bears good fruit as he weaves into the narrative a wide range of actors, actions, and alliances and argues



The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade

By Philip Jenkins

HarperOne, 448 pp., \$29.99

Jonathan H. Ebel teaches U.S. religious history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and is the author of Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War (Princeton University Press).

for the global religious consequences of the Great War.

“When elites might have become secular,” Jenkins writes, “ordinary people tended to maintain their faiths against those of their rulers, whether in Ireland, India, or Armenia, and religious identifications became all the stronger in times of conflict.” Though the heart of his story is still the war on the Western front, the religious dynamics of the Eastern front, the communist war against the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian genocide, struggles among religious actors in India, Africa, and Singapore, and postwar religious nationalisms all find their way into his narrative in meaningful ways. These events, and the identities that shaped and were shaped by them, did not vanish into history when the Allies and Germany signed a ceasefire agreement at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918.

As with any work of historical synthesis so broad in scope, *The Great and Holy War* gives up something in nuance and specificity to gain what it does in breadth. But other than a few over-stretched comparisons to current religious militarisms, the trade seems well worth it. Jenkins’s in-text citations and thorough notes will lead the interested reader to more than enough specificity. (For instance, the archives of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY offer example after example of full-throated support for America’s righteous war against Germany.)

Had Jenkins invested more time in discussing regional or national specifics, the book might not have been as effective as it is in recovering the rhetorics, symbols, expectations, and narratives shared by the warring powers. These compelling and troubling comparisons make the Great War seem all the more tragic, all the more perverse, all the more important to study.

With so much in common both in the mainstream and at the margins, how could such a chasm have opened between the nations? How could so many lives have been swallowed? Comprehensive answers elude us still, but Jenkins’s excellent study demonstrates that the pursuit of such answers requires us to look closely at religion—even if we are tempted to look away.

Updike

By Adam Begley
Harper, 576 pp., \$29.99

John Updike was one of a small number of masters of English-language fiction in the second half of the 20th century, the only WASP in a group that includes Saul Bellow, Cormac McCarthy, Vladimir Nabokov, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Philip Roth. This wasn’t just a matter of circumstances. Beginning at Harvard, Updike set out to immortalize middle-class America—to produce, as he wrote in a letter to his mother in those early days, “an epic out of the Protestant ethic.” And so he did in the brilliant Rabbit series of four novels and one novella, as well as in twentysome other novels, in hundreds of short stories, and in poetry, light verse, cartoons, and hundreds of essays on art, books, and popular culture.

But Updike has never been a critic’s darling. His desire for popular acclaim was probably an impediment to canonical standing. Furthermore, affability and seemingly easy popularity can turn critics sour.

Success did come early for Updike, according to this skillful narrative by his first literary biographer, Adam Begley. Less than two months after he graduated from Harvard in 1954, what Updike called “the ecstatic breakthrough” took place: the *New Yorker* bought the story “Friends from Philadelphia.” The magazine paid him \$490, nearly half what Updike’s father earned in a year back in Pennsylvania.

A year later, fresh from art school in England, the young author was working full-time at that venerable magazine—writing stories, “Talk of the Town” pieces, and light verse. Begley comments on Updike’s reaction to his rapid success: “He wasn’t despairing or thwarted or resentful; he wasn’t alienated or conflicted or drunk; he quarreled with no one. In short, he cultivated none of the professional deformations that habitually plague American writers.” The dust jack-

Reviewed by Jon M. Sweeney, author of Inventing Hell: Dante, the Bible, and Eternal Torment (Jericho).

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et photo portrays the Updike we know, the one with the grin.

Updike and his first wife, Mary, a Radcliffe fine arts major, met in a medieval sculpture class and married at a Unitarian church on Harvard Square where Mary's father had been a minister before taking a similar post in Chicago. In Begley's account, religion first comes to the fore in Updike's life through arguments he had with his

father-in-law a year after the marriage. As a child growing up at Grace Lutheran Church in Shillington, Pennsylvania, Updike had "enjoyed a comfortable, untroubled faith," according to Begley. But when he was faced with an articulate representative of Unitarianism, his wobbly Lutheranism began to take shape. He decided that he could not respect Unitarianism's way of avoiding "embarrassments to reason." While

in England he strengthened his religious mind and developed a spiritual resolve. He began reading G. K. Chesterton and Jacques Maritain and insisted that a Christian believes in certain "concrete attributes" of faith, such as the Eucharist.

Early on, Updike published stories with religious themes, such as "Dentistry and Doubt," in which a minister ponders his religious doubts while sitting in the dentist's chair. Another, "Sunday Teasing," depicts a young man who tires of churchgoing and decides to stay home on Sundays and read St. Paul and Miguel de Unamuno in solitary contemplation of the Divine.

The 1976 novel *Marry Me: A Romance* is also full of religious details and doubts. Its main character is Jerry, a Lutheran who reads Barth and Berdyaev and whose wife is Unitarian, adherent of a faith Jerry regards as "pale." *Roger's Version*, published a decade later, memorably depicts a divinity school professor who is full of doubts and in conflict with an evangelical student who believes he can demonstrate the existence of God using computer technology. Then, of course, Updike made Harry Angstrom of the Rabbit cycle his "representative Kierkegaardian man," later telling interviewers that Angstrom was an alter Updike.

Always worn lightly but seriously, religious ideas became central to Updike's self-involved, suburban, upwardly mobile middle-class American universe for a half century. "I decided . . . I *would* believe," the author wrote in his memoirs. He read widely in theology throughout his life in order to bolster the will and spilled it all into his fiction. These religious explorations are what make Updike's writing so interesting, and Begley explores them well.

No doubt many of Updike's stories hold clues to his life, but Begley devotes too much space in the first 150 pages to attempting to associate fictional settings, characters, even addresses, with their approximate equivalents in Updike's childhood in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and his life in Manhattan when he worked at the *New Yorker*. In the rest of the book, Begley spends too much time

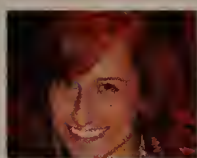
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with Updike on the couch, imagining the causes and experiences behind situations, anxieties, and marital infidelities in Updike's fiction. For example, Begley contends that Updike's early writing reveals a man "at once craving and resisting assimilation to a powerfully attractive, occasionally frightening milieu." In the works completed after he moved his family to Ipswich, where they had a social circle much like themselves—white, upper-middle-class, well-educated, and Christian—Begley purports to uncover an "expression of displaced desire" and a "symptom of restlessness and anxiety."

At one point, Begley even asserts that Updike penned a certain fictional description of a woman with one of his Ipswich lovers in mind. On another occasion he uses the first instance of extramarital lust in Updike's fiction to approximate the date of his first real-life act of infidelity. It must be tempting to pursue these angles in order to understand the author of *Couples*, Updike's sensational 1968 novel about the adulterous pursuits of ten couples in a small town outside of Boston (the novel landed Updike on the cover of *Time*), but Begley focuses way too much on decoding Updike's first-person, present-tense fiction, treating it as though it is biography.

My primary impression after spending a dozen hours in this interior and exterior narrative of Updike's relatively uneventful literary life is that he found plenty of joy. In one of his excellent collections of short prose, *More Matter*, published ten years before his death, Updike refers to "the happiness of creation, the rapture of creating something out of nothing." Throughout life, he was delighted to read and write, and for those opportunities he was always grateful. *Self-Consciousness*, a 1989 memoir, includes this description of the undergraduate Updike attending a poetry lecture: "My heart was beating like that of a boy with a pocket of heavy nickels as he walks through the door . . . of a candy shop." His infectious joy in literature, faith, doubt, and discovery was genuine. It filled his life and books, and it probably still turns some of his critics against him.

The Death Class: A True Story About Life

By Erika Hayasaki
Simon & Schuster, 288 pp., \$25.00

What constitutes the perfect subject for literary nonfiction? Surely, there should be something newsworthy to report, combined with something timeless. The writer should use the tools of both journalism and fiction: analysis, imagination, sensory-rich description, and abstract, metaphorical language. The perfect subject contains layers of meaning, moving between the concrete and the spiritual and leaving the reader in a state of wonder.

In the subject of death, and particularly the subject of death as taught in the classroom and beyond, former *Los Angeles Times* reporter Erika Hayasaki found the perfect subject for her first book.

The Death Class of the title is a popular course taught by Norma Bowe at Kean University in Union, New Jersey. This book was born when Hayasaki, having covered a succession of traumatic death events, including the Virginia Tech shootings, the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and the execution-style killing of three teenagers in a schoolyard, read about the class and decided to shadow the professor and take the course herself. What started out as a reporter satisfying her curiosity became something more and deeper—a healing event for the reporter, the professor, and many students.

In the spirit of participatory journalism, Hayasaki begins the narrative with a personal story, now almost 20 years old, about the murder of a high school friend in Lynnwood, Washington, on the same day of the Oklahoma City bombing. As a journalist for the school newspaper, Hayasaki tried to honor her friend, Sangeeta, by telling her story. But the world was focused on Oklahoma City, and the school wanted to return to nor-

Reviewed by Shirley Hershey Showalter, who is the author of Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World and can be found online at www.shirleyshowalter.com.



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malcy as soon as possible. Hayasaki, however, never forgot the bone-searing screams of her friend's mother at the wake and the funeral.

Years later, at the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, Hayasaki again encountered distraught parents, and she covered the funeral of a courageous French teacher who died trying to protect her students. All of their stories begged for meaning, and none appeared. So when she learned about the Death Class and its three-year waiting list, Hayasaki wanted to meet the teacher.

It took five years—from the point Hayasaki began to shadow Bowe to the release of this book—for the author to plumb the depths of her own story and the story of the professor and her students. She faithfully followed the only stipulation Bowe imposed: she could follow Bowe, but she had to do all the work of the class.

One of the most brilliant decisions Hayasaki made in constructing this book was to begin each chapter with an assignment from the class completed by one of the characters in the book, including, sometimes, herself.

Like both Hayasaki and Bowe, I had a

personal encounter with death—my baby sister's—that marked me for life. I read both Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* in the 1970s shortly after they first came out. The deaths of friends and my own intimations of mortality during the past two decades have led me to place preparation for death, and living in the moment, at the center of my personal mission.

Evidently many other people are also interested in “dragging death out of the darkness.” The recent *New York Times* best-seller list illustrates the point: books about heaven abound, and popular subjects include aging with dignity and hospice and palliative care. Hayasaki traces the development of what could be called a fledgling movement. The baby boom generation once again is reshaping a developmental stage.

Bowe's favorite theorist appears to be Erik Erikson, whose eight stages of human development form the structure of the Death Class and heavily influence Hayasaki's book. Her emphasis on Erikson's seventh stage, generativity, leads Bowe to go far beyond the normal boundaries between studying subjects

and getting involved in social action. The heart of the course is experiential education. Field trips to cemeteries, morgues, and funeral homes are just the beginning. Students in the course have bonded so deeply with each other and with the professor that they have formed an organization called Be the Change to help local residents with problems of health, housing, and food.

The book is best when the author is reporting. Hayasaki knows how to pick up one thread and tie it expertly to the next. She can describe the macro view of death, moving from denial to more openness, and also the micro view, taking us into the lives of at least five students in depth and of many others in broad strokes.

My only disappointment with the book came at the end. The author and professor take a trip together that helps Bowe heal some difficult memories. The last lines of the book are personal, and they are the professor's words, not the author's. As a vicarious member of the Death Class, I was hoping for a conclusion that would leave me in a state of wonder—not for an answer to the mystery of death, but at least a slight shiver from passing so closely beside it.

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Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism

By Eberhard Busch

Eerdmans, 384 pp., \$32.00 paperback

Christian theology needs to rediscover its key figures from time to time, and the 200th anniversary of Søren Kierkegaard's birth this past year provided such an occasion. Confessional documents too need to be continually rediscovered, as readers bring to them new questions and concerns. This past year also marked the 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism, which remains one of the best-known Reformation-era confessions. As Eberhard Busch notes, "A piece of work like this stays alive only as people think through its message in their own times."

In his "conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism" Busch returns to its Question 32, "Why are you called a

Christian?" and provides a contemporary answer. *Drawn to Freedom* is a translation of Busch's 1998 book and retains the colloquial feel of the original, with its flashes of humor and frequent appeal to popular German proverbs, poems, and hymns.

Busch was Karl Barth's last assistant and is best known for his theological work on Barth, especially his large biographical volume culled from Barth's letters and papers. Busch recently retired from his professorship in Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen in central Germany. Barth was the first person to hold that position, and he began his teaching career in the winter of 1921–1922 with lectures on the Heidelberg Catechism. So it is no surprise that Busch's engagement with the catechism reflects some of the hallmarks of Barth's theology: a repudiation of natural theology, suspicions about infant baptism, and a thoroughgoing Christocentrism. Readers of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* will also recognize the leisurely, spiraling style of Busch's exposition.

Drawn to Freedom is a long, free-

wheeling conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism, with Busch sometimes using it for leverage against theological distortions in the contemporary church, and sometimes challenging the catechism's assumptions or extrapolating well beyond it. The advice I give my students for reading *Church Dogmatics* is also applicable to Busch's volume: maintain forward momentum rather than stopping to puzzle over a single sentence. If the point is important, it will appear again.

Like most Christian catechisms, the Heidelberg provides instruction on basic elements of the faith. These are fitted into a threefold structure, often memorized as "guilt, grace, and gratitude": we are in misery because our sin has estranged us from God; in Christ, God graciously delivers us from this misery; the Spirit

Reviewed by Amy Plantinga Pauw, who teaches theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and is general editor of Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Westminster John Knox).

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empowers us to claim this deliverance in lives of gratitude and good works. The Heidelberg Catechism was originally intended to build theological consensus between Lutheran and Reformed Christians in the Palatinate region, though over the centuries it has been claimed almost exclusively by Reformed Protestants. Busch's engagement with the Heidelberg acknowledges these ecumenical origins; he cites Martin Luther almost as much as he does John Calvin.

Appeals to Luther undergird Busch's main theme: the freedom of a Christian. Busch counters the contemporary Western notion of "independent freedom" with a theological alternative. On our own, we are in bondage to sin and alienated from God, but "for us and for our good God takes over doing what we cannot do." Human freedom is rooted in the freedom of God to do away with the misery of sin through the work of Christ and to give us new life in the Spirit. Busch defends the atonement theology of the Heidelberg, with its portrayal of the cross as an atoning sacrifice that delivers humanity from divine judgment and wrath. To question the need for Christ to bear our sin is "sheer religious arrogance on the part of sinners intent on self-redemption." True human freedom, Busch insists, is "obedient freedom, freedom in the covenant founded and maintained by God."

In its very first question, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" the Heidelberg Catechism sets a pastoral and personal tone. The ugliness of Reformation polemics is largely missing, except in Question and Answer 80, a later addition, in which the Roman Catholic mass is described as "a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry." North American denominations that claim the Heidelberg Catechism as a confessional standard, such as the Christian Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Reformed Church of America, have in recent years distanced themselves theologically from this polemic, acknowledging that it is not an accurate reflection of Roman Catholic teaching and practice. Busch, who feels free to challenge the catechism at other points, strangely urges his readers to "join the Heidelberg in disputing the Roman view" of the eucharistic

meal, regretting only the catechism's uncharacteristically harsh tone. Here is certainly a place where what Busch elsewhere calls the "embarrassing narrowness" of the Heidelberg deserves widening out.

Liberationist, feminist, and ecological concerns have left only the faintest of traces on Busch's reflections. For Busch, "the most burning wound in the ecumenical community of God" is the separation between church and synagogue. The German church's collaboration with Nazism casts a long shadow over his theology. In a large extrapolation from the immediate concerns of the catechism, Busch gives a consistently positive account of Jews and Judaism, rejecting anti-Judaic stereotypes, upholding the centrality of the Old Testament witness for Christians, and insisting on God's unwavering faithfulness to the Jewish people. For Christians living in Germany after the Shoah, this is what "freedom in the covenant" requires.

When Barth made a visit to the United States at the end of his life, he was asked what sort of theology he would write as an American theologian. His answer was "a theology of freedom." For a nation awash in the rhetoric of freedom, Barth thought that what was needed was a reminder of the "one real freedom" of the gospel. *Drawn to Freedom* renews that invitation to North American readers.

Dust

By Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor
Knopf, 384 pp., \$25.95

In this mystical and lyrical novel by Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, a woman returns to her childhood home in northern Kenya to bury her brother, who has been killed by police. The home is haunted by ghosts—literal and figurative—and her parents seem choked and misshapen by the secrets they have never told. History, politics, and the desire for revenge shape every corner of this place that is seemingly forgotten by time. But the past lives on in the people, most of whom forget and forgive nothing.

Arabel Ajany Oganda escaped this dust patch when both she and her brother left in search of economic success. She went to Canada and then to Brazil, pursuing the gods of opportunity as far from Kenya as she could go. Her brother went to Nairobi, where he became involved in a fight for justice that endangered his life. Ajany is called home by news of her brother's death, and when she returns to her parents' plot of land, she finds it on the verge of disintegration, her parents unable to move beyond their personal tragedy.

Meanwhile, a man who is a stranger to her is also traveling to her family's land—from England—in search of her brother and in search of a record of his own father, whom he believes died in her family's home. When Isaiah and Ajany meet, the two do not trust each other, but they do need one another to unravel the mysteries of their interrelated families. They gradually become partners on a search to understand and integrate their parents' violent histories. *Dust* begins on a street in Nairobi and ends on Ajany's ancestral land, which she has reclaimed and will inherit. We have the feeling that whatever Ajany and Isaiah will make together is better than what Ajany has chased across the globe and better than what her parents have bequeathed her.

This theme makes *Dust* fundamentally a forward-looking book, despite its wrestling with the bitter remnants of colonialism. It suggests that the future can be claimed and shaped by people who are willing to incorporate the past with honesty and integrity. *Dust* creates this sense of the future from details specific to the region: the acacia, goat milk, doum palms, and locusts act as sources of revelation. As Isaiah and Ajany claim the land that Isaiah's father sought to exploit and that Ajany's parents sought to hoard, they seem to find a place from which to begin again.

But Isaiah and Ajany are not exactly Adam and Eve in a restored garden. They have the entire history of humanity to remind them of the dangers of losing what they've been given.

Reviewed by Amy Frykholm, CENTURY associate editor.

Lights, camera, teach

In this column I usually write about a television show or a movie that I've watched from the comfort of my couch or in a movie theater. Other people have always created the experiences that I watch, discuss, and critique. But recently I flipped the formula: I spent time in front of the camera as part of videotaping an online class.

The last thing that the team and I filmed for the online course was the introduction. Though I'd been fairly comfortable adapting my course material for the online version, videotaping the introduction left me floundering.

The studio crew told me that this was a common experience. We teachers are used to "performing" our courses, they explained, but we're not used to stepping in front of a camera, smiling at nobody, and using our own names. I found the camera to be an odd stand-in for human beings, and I had to learn to bridge the distance between me and the unknown students who would see the lectures. We had to film "Hi, I'm Beth Jones" several times before I got past the strangeness.

I brought mixed feelings to this experiment. I believe strongly in in-person, embodied teaching. If I am a reasonably good teacher, it's because I've learned to teach in relationship with students whose faces I can see. I believe that relationship is key to everything I do and that education isn't content transfer: it's mentoring. This is especially important in teaching theology, where I have to work against

gnostic dualisms that denigrate bodies and embodied life. I want my students to delight in the goodness of the body and to be encouraged and empowered by the hope that God is including their bodies in God's good plans.

Yet here I was trying to use media to bridge a distance between me and students whom I couldn't imagine, let alone see. It was a new way of communicating. I had to get a feel for starting and stopping, for thinking about my course material in unchangeable chunks.

Clear communication and clear organization, for example, are not a choice in video format; they're indispensable. In the classroom I often draw figures on the whiteboard in order to clarify a point, or I stop and go back to earlier material to help students understand something new. In the video format I had to roll those functions into carefully worded teaching units. I believe that the effort made me a better communicator, and I hope to use what I've learned in my flesh-and-blood classroom.

I am also struck by the way that Internet-mediated education can bring learning into a different set of embodied relationships. My husband listens to history lectures while he's folding laundry, and the lecture material sometimes finds its way into our domestic life. The kids hear something and ask a question, or we pause the lecture to talk about a connection that it has to our lives. Internet education is accessible in ways that more traditional education can't be.



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THE OTHER SIDE: "We had to film the introduction several times before I got past the strangeness."

I've always had a populist impulse toward theories of distance education. Education at a residential liberal arts college is a rare privilege, and it's a place where certain valuable experiences happen—experiences that can't be replicated online. But education offered in various forms of media also offers valuable experiences—some that would never have been available to students otherwise. I don't want to surrender the Protestant concept of the priesthood, but I believe that the "holy priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5) would benefit from access to more knowledge of the scriptures and the Christian tradition. If mediating education in new ways lets that happen, then I'm open to it.

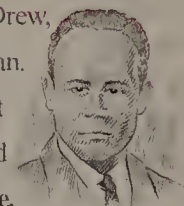
Yes, there are good reasons to resist mediated education, but if it's bringing lecture halls into living rooms and providing learning for many who aren't or can't be in a nonvirtual classroom, then let's do both—and hope that old-school education and Internet distance learning will inform and improve one another.

The author is Beth Felker Jones, who teaches theology at Wheaton College in Illinois.



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by Carol Howard Merritt

CHURCH in the MAKING

New soil, new planters

On a bright blue afternoon, Anna Woofenden and I walked along the sidewalks that skirt the cozy houses in the Bay Area of California, and Anna started to articulate her call. “I’m not going to be a church planter,” she said.

My head snapped up as Anna continued to concentrate on the cement. I was stunned. As long as I had known her, Anna had dreamed of starting a worshipping community.

“I *am* a church planter,” she declared. My mouth cracked wide with a relieved smile.

The timing of Anna’s declaration was important, because Anna was also working

The project has been organic in another way: Anna is starting an urban garden church, and she envisions a gathering that will work in community beds, worship with one another, and feed each other as they have need.

Anna began by finding internships and networks of people who were working with, thinking about, and worshipping with food. As an intern at Bread for the World, she learned about food justice. While she served St. Gregory of Nyssa (the community that Sara Miles writes

to explore different income streams—individual donors, denominational grants, and local grants. A few weeks ago, before Anna graduated, all of these things were in place.

We need more people like Anna, people willing and able to start new communities straight out of seminary. Many denominations, worried about being good stewards of their resources, have been nervous about church planters who don’t have experience in traditional churches. We quickly recall the new communities

are coming to the end of their lifespan, others need to take root. Right now, an increasing number of congregations are closing or can no longer employ a full-time minister or have cut associate positions. The thinning opportunities make it particularly difficult for graduates entering the ministry, because when churches call pastors, they often give preference to those who have experience.

The largest generation our country has ever seen is entering adulthood. We have heard much about how millennials (born between 1982 and 2004) are leaving churches, but since the youngest of them are only ten years old, it seems rather odd to predict what an entire generation’s church attendance habits will be. Instead, we should be planting new congregations with a goal to nurture their spiritual lives.

The harvest is plentiful. And as we have more seminary students than we can employ, our laborers are plentiful too. In this transitional time of harvesting and planting, our denominations will need to welcome the vision of seminary graduates who want to plant new churches, support them in their work, and watch something beautiful grow.

We need more people like Anna, people willing and able to start new communities.

on her last year of requirements at Earlham School of Religion. She didn’t wait to emerge from the classroom in Indiana to tend the soil for a new church in California. It’s not as if Anna rented a storefront and preached to a row of empty folding chairs; in fact, a lot of our conversation that afternoon hinged on where the church would be located. But she had been planting, nonetheless, in a steady, organic process—“organic” in the sense that she labored hard and prepared well in order to watch something beautiful slowly grow.

about in *Take This Bread*), she thought about the interplay between the liturgy on Sunday morning and what happens during the church’s feeding program.

Then Anna looked for people who would pray for and support a new ministry. Anna networked with UNCO, an organization that nurtures new ministries and creative church leaders. She gathered a prayer group—people who pray for her and the community. She wrote a ministry plan, articulating the vision of the garden church as clearly as possible to her denomination. And she assembled a board

that never took root. In fact, we often know the exact total of dollars spent trying to plant the new community. Afraid that we will sow on barren ground, we often wait until the soil, weather, and seeds are perfect before we start planting. Even when denominational bodies glean assets from congregations that have closed and set aside funds for starting new communities, they sit on the money, waiting for those optimal conditions.

In spite of these important cautions, in this transitional season, when many churches

Carol Howard Merritt is author of *Tribal Church*.

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Sacrifice of Isaac (Florence baptistery), by Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455)

In 1401, under the patronage of the Arte di Calimala, a competition to decorate the east doors of the baptistery in Florence was announced. Of the seven Tuscan sculptors who entered the competition, the young Lorenzo Ghiberti, barely 20 years of age, emerged the victor. The subject of the doors was the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), and the theme was that of divine intervention. In this climactic scene, Abraham is poised to strike a fatal blow with his knife. Isaac is depicted as what some have called “the first truly Renaissance nude”—perfectly proportioned, energetic yet graceful. An angel’s gesture stops the sacrifice, and the viewer notices a ram caught in the thickets in the upper left-hand register. This text has long challenged communities of faith. Some Jewish interpretations, such as the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, posited that Isaac was 37 years old, and the near sacrifice was an act of faith of not one but two consenting adults, both Isaac and Abraham. Christian interpreters from the patristic period (if not earlier; cf. Hebrews 11:17) had interpreted the story typologically. Melito of Sardis, for example, wrote: “For as a ram he [Christ] was bound . . . And he carried the wood upon his shoulders. And he was led up to be slain like Isaac by his Father. But Christ suffered, whereas Isaac did not suffer” (cf. Frag. 9–11).

Art selection and commentary by Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the art department at Baylor University, and Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in Baylor’s religion department.

NOTES FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH

"What happens when you look at Christianity outside its Euro-American framework?"

"That question becomes pressing when we look at numerical changes in the churches today—when, for instance, we realize that Africa will soon be home to the largest population of Christian believers on the planet.

"Although I describe my area of study as Global Christianity, that's a flawed phrase: if it's not global, is it really Christianity?"



Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* is a landmark book for understanding contemporary global history. *Publishers Weekly* called it "a clarion call for anyone interested in the future of Christianity."

Philip Jenkins writes *Notes from the Global Church* for the *Christian Century*.

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